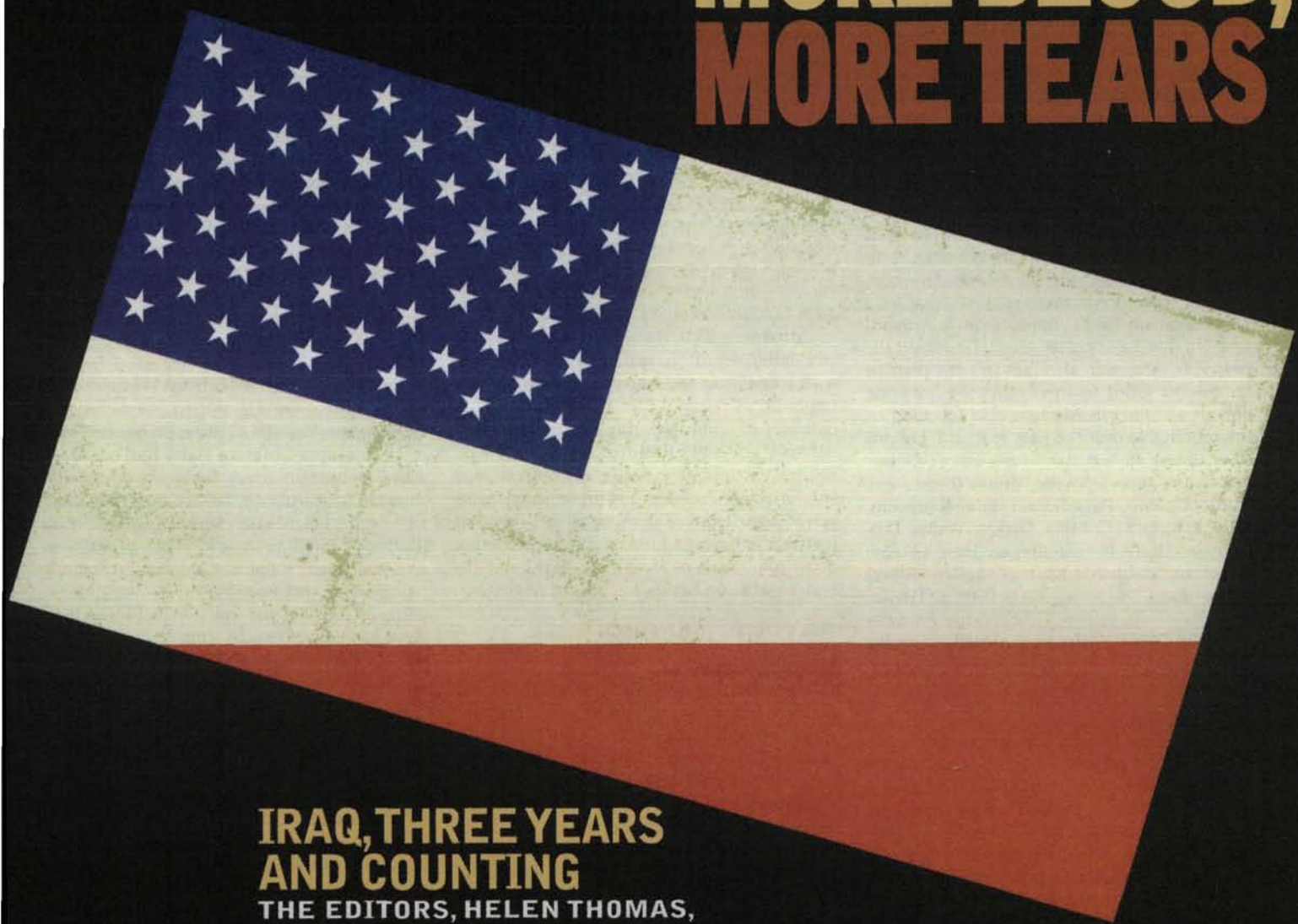


Gerald Early: MLK AT THE CROSSROADS

The Nation.

**MORE BLOOD,
MORE TEARS**



IRAQ, THREE YEARS AND COUNTING

THE EDITORS, HELEN THOMAS,
ARI BERMAN, TOM ENGELHARDT

AFGHANISTAN: THE OTHER WAR

CHRISTIAN PARENTI

MAR. 27, 2006
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LETTERS

LIBERALS, LIBERALS EVERYWHERE

Washington, DC

■ In his March 6 "Liberal Media" column, titled "The Gasbag Gap," which discusses the Sunday-morning public affairs broadcasts, Eric Alterman writes that "every week" on *This Week With George Stephanopoulos*, Mr. Stephanopoulos seeks the wisdom of George Will and Fareed Zakaria "with no balance whatsoever." By that, he means no liberal or progressive voice. Had Alterman done some basic research, he would have seen how false that statement was.

It is true that Will appears almost every week and Zakaria has been on more than fifteen times in the past year (though not every week). Both provide keen insight for our viewers. However, it is not true, as Alterman suggests, that Sam Donaldson no longer appears on the roundtable. In fact, he appeared eleven times over the past year. Alterman also fails to note, perhaps because he failed to check, that the following liberals and progressives have also appeared on the roundtable over the past year: E.J. Dionne (four times), Robert Reich (two times), Donna Brazile (six times), Kweide Mfume (two times), Mario Cuomo, Paul Begala, Paul Krugman, Howell Raines, Cynthia Tucker, Walter Dillinger, and last—but certainly not least—*Nation* editor and publisher Katrina vanden Heuvel (three times).

KATHERINE O'HEARN

Executive Producer

This Week With George Stephanopoulos

ALTERMAN REPLIES

New York City

■ "Basic research" or no, Katherine O'Hearn's critique strikes me as a kind of bait-and-switch operation. I never said liberals are unrepresented on *This Week*. I said, based on the careful research of Media Matters for America, that they are consistently overmatched. And they are. The study, which offered an extremely generous definition of "progressive," found that during Clinton's second term, Republicans and conservatives outmatched Democrats and progressives on the show by a margin of 45 percent to 39 percent. During the first Bush term, the figures were 40 percent Republican/conservative and just 28 percent Democratic/liberal. With progressive journalists, as opposed to officials, the figures are more heavily weighted toward the right; 54 to 33 during the second Clinton term and 36 to 17 during the first Bush term (with the rest coded as "neutral," again extremely generously).

That O'Hearn can name a few progressives who have appeared with Will in no way contradicts anything I wrote; nor do the few appearances of liberal journalists like E.J. Dionne

(who, I noted, was the only exception in the study) and my boss, Katrina vanden Heuvel. Will's appearances probably number in the four figures over the past twenty years, and he is frequently offered the last word or one-on-one interviews with public figures. If we round down that estimate to 800 for argument's sake, is ABC News asking us to believe that Will is 400 times as perspicacious as E.J., or 800 times as thoughtful as Krugman? Obviously not. But it is saying that it is wholly comfortable inviting a right-wing pundit to be a central player, and equally forceful liberals need not apply. (If O'Hearn is going to count appearances by liberals who came after the study concluded and after my column appeared, I guess we're going to have to throw in yet another powwow with "Mr. Straight Talk," John McCain, occurring as I write this.)

Moreover, *This Week* has a rather expansive definition of "liberal." For instance, even with Donaldson and (the then-liberal) Stephanopoulos as regulars, I recall no unapologetic defenses of Clinton during the impeachment debacle, nor any full-throated critics of Ken Starr, even though a majority of Americans supported the President and pronounced themselves appalled at Starr's behavior. For that matter, I'm having a little trouble remembering many opponents of Bush's war. But I'm a liberal, so what do I know?

ERIC ALTERMAN

THEY DON'T KNOW JACK

Colorado Springs

■ James Dobson is hardly a close ally of disgraced lobbyist Jack Abramoff, despite the insinuations Max Blumenthal lays on *Nation* readers ["Abramoff's Evangelical Soldiers," Feb. 20]. Abramoff's personal e-mails have led some people to believe that Dobson helped him defeat a tribal casino in Louisiana, but it's an empty boast—like a rooster taking credit for the sunrise. Dobson didn't do anyone's bidding.

The fact is, gambling has been mentioned as a destructive force to families roughly 200 times on Focus on the Family radio broadcasts during the organization's twenty-nine-year history. So when we took action against Louisiana gambling expansion in 2002, it was a continuation of a long-established pattern. We used our own money, and Dobson had no contact with Abramoff and no knowledge of his activities.

Focus on the Family is getting mentioned in the sad Abramoff story only because we quite coincidentally fought the same casino at the same time. Dobson needs no one's pressure to oppose gambling in all its forms, because he's motivated by only one thing: the desire to safeguard families from the crime, bankruptcy, corruption and divorce that proliferate when-

ever a casino comes to town. We did it because gambling destroys families. Why, or how, Jack Abramoff did it is a story we have no connection to.

TOM MINNERY

Focus on the Family

BLUMENTHAL REPLIES

Washington, DC

■ Tom Minnery omits any mention of the man who prompted and coordinated Focus's involvement in Abramoff's schemes—Ralph Reed, Abramoff's go-between with Dobson and the Christian right, whom he then rewarded with \$4 million in casino money. As documented in the e-mail exchanges among Reed, Abramoff and Abramoff's business partner, Michael Scanlon—subpoenaed by the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs—they delighted in manipulating Dobson like a puppet on a string.

In February 2002, when Abramoff learned that the Jena Choctaws, a tribal competitor to one of his casino clients, had contracted the lobbying services of DC super-lawyer and current Mississippi Governor Haley Barbour, Reed asked Dobson to attack Barbour on his radio show. In a February 6, 2002, e-mail Abramoff tells Reed, "Let me know when Dobson hits him [Barbour]. I want to savor it." That same day, in an e-mail titled "Ralph and Dobson," Abramoff tells Scanlon that Reed "got to Dobson who is going to...get on the radio!" On February 19 Reed got a direct request from Abramoff. "Can we get Dobson on the air?" Reed responded that day in an e-mail, "yes. We're negotiating that now." In an e-mail later that day, Reed told Abramoff, "called Dobson this a.m."

The next day Abramoff wrote to Scanlon: Reed "wants a budget for radio in the state. I'm inclined to say yes, so we can get this Dobson ad up. He asked for \$150K. We'll play it in WH [the White House] and Interior." Later that day Abramoff was jubilant. Reed "may have finally scored for us!" he wrote to Scanlon. "Dobson goes up on the radio next week." On February 26 Abramoff asked Reed, "where are we with Falwell, Robertson, Dobson, etc.? we need to see some action in D.C. That's what I sold them for \$100K." Doesn't James Dobson know that lies make baby Jesus cry?

MAX BLUMENTHAL

HILLS ALIVE WITH SOUND OF MONEY

Springfield, Mo.

■ In "Can Justice Be Trusted?" [Feb. 20], on the Abramoff/Guam story, Ari Berman mentions Howard Hills, the Abramoff conduit for Guam lobbying funds paid in \$9,000 increments. Hills's irregular practice of law is well known to the

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EDITORIALS

Three Years and Counting

On March 19, 2003, without the approval of the United Nations Security Council and against the advice of many of America's closest allies, the Bush Administration launched what has become one of the longest-running wars in US history. Now, on the third anniversary of the start of the war, we are just beginning to feel the full effects of the greatest catastrophe in American foreign policy since the Vietnam War. We are all familiar with the staggering costs in lives and money of the Iraq War: 2,300 Americans killed, more than 16,000 wounded or maimed; about 30,000 direct Iraqi deaths and more than 100,000 attributable to the war; upward of \$300 billion in direct war expenditures and close to \$1 trillion in estimated total costs.

We are also painfully aware of the longer-term damage to US foreign policy and to our standing in the world. The war has bred a new generation of religious extremists, dangerously heightened sectarian tensions in the Islamic world, strengthened Iran's hand in Iraq and in matters of nuclear diplomacy, and created the most serious threat to the world's oil supply since the OPEC embargo—all the while undermining American authority in the region and straining the US military to the breaking point.

But these facts and figures do not capture the full tragedy that Iraq has become or the horror that may yet befall that country and indeed the region. As recent events make clear, Iraq is now on the verge of a full-scale civil war, which US forces are helpless to prevent and for which they are increasingly blamed by all sides. The blood bath following the bombing of the golden-domed Shiite mosque in Samarra claimed more than 1,400 lives, as angry Shiite mobs attacked Sunni mosques and killed their Sunni neighbors. This outbreak followed months of low-intensity ethnic cleansing in many Iraqi neighborhoods and increasing targeting of Sunnis by Shiite militias, many of

them operating under cover of the Interior Ministry and the Iraqi army the United States has been training.

Throughout the three years of the war, the Administration and its supporters have tried to create the illusion of progress by hyping one democratic "landmark" after another. But as this magazine has warned all along, each landmark was just another step toward the violence and misery that now engulfs ordinary Iraqis. Meanwhile, the only democratic landmark that really matters—establishing an accountable national unity government capable of keeping order and beginning the reconstruction of the country—still eludes the efforts of America's Ambassador to Iraq, Zalmay Khalilzad. Khalilzad may understand the importance of a national unity government better than his predecessors, but he cannot make up for the original sin of the invasion and occupation or for all the crimes and mistakes, from Falluja to Abu Ghraib to a flawed constitutional process.

Still, the effort to discredit those who would question American policy in Iraq continues with the usual attacks on the patriotism and steadfastness of those who argue for a US withdrawal or even for establishing a timetable for withdrawal. Vice President Cheney warns about "defeatists" who would have the United States leave Iraq before finishing the job.

Over the past three years, the Administration has offered us a succession of reasons we must "stay the course" to match the succession of rationales for the war itself. An American withdrawal, we were told, would embolden the insurgency, make Iraq a safe haven for terrorists and foreign jihadis and lead to civil war. One by one each of these predictions has come true. Not, of course, because we withdrew or even announced a timetable for withdrawal or redeployment but because we could not control the forces the war and the occupation unleashed or created.

Now we are told that if we leave, the civil war will get worse. And indeed it could. The past few weeks have offered a glimpse into the future: Sunni fighting Shiite, Shiite fighting Sunni, one

EDITORIALS

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Shiite militia fighting another Shiite militia—many blaming the United States for the violence and all eventually targeting American soldiers. Following the bombing of the Shiite mosque, Abdul Aziz al-Hakim, head of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq and one of the most powerful Shiites, blamed the US ambassador for giving a green light to terrorist bombers by insisting that SCIRI-controlled Shiite militias be disarmed. Other Shiite leaders offered similar complaints, and, perhaps more ominous, the Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani called for tribal militias to guard Shiite shrines and personalities, a sign that he wants Shiite militias to take things into their own hands. Meanwhile, Sunnis quickly pointed the finger at US troops for not protecting Sunni mosques and worshipers from Shiite retaliation, even as Sunni insurgents vowed to continue their attacks on US forces. Thus in a worrying development, the American occupation has succeeded in turning both major sectarian groups in Iraq against the United States.

At this point, there may be little America can do to stop the sectarian violence or the momentum toward civil war. As Juan Cole noted in his blog, *Informed Comment*, during the latest violence, "the US military ordered the US soldiers in Baghdad to stay in their barracks and not to circulate if it could be helped," illustrating just how useless the American ground forces are in Iraq.

The best we can do is remove US forces and seek the help of other nations to keep the violence from spreading, in the hope that this will help change the dynamic in Iraq. As much as we would like to fix what we "broke," we do not have the legitimacy or the know-how. The American public, the men and women in uniform and the Iraqis themselves all seem to recognize this. Only 30 percent of Americans favor the Bush Administration's handling of Iraq, 72 percent of US troops serving in Iraq believe US forces should leave in the next year and, possibly most revealing of all, 87 percent of all Iraqis want an end to the US occupation while 47 percent support attacks on US troops. It is time to get US forces out of the untenable position the Bush Administration has put them in. The question is: When will our "leaders" in Washington come to accept that same conclusion and at least prevent the futile loss of more American lives?

COMMENT

Bringing the War Home

The most powerful antiwar actions of the spring are not likely to occur in Washington. National antiwar groups will mount marches, lobbying days and other traditional initiatives. But it would take a monumental push to change the thinking of Republican majorities in the House and Senate, which are not yet ready to break with the Bush Administration on Iraq issues, or to convince an overly cautious Democratic opposition to press for withdrawal. And divisions over strategy and focus will continue to make it hard for a national antiwar movement that has struggled to communicate the depth and breadth of frustration with the war to do so in the brief period before the capital city becomes

COMMENT

fully obsessed with this fall's Congressional elections.

But politics do not begin and end in Washington. So it is that the antiwar messages most likely to be heard and acted upon by Congressional Democrats and wavering Republicans trying to figure out how the war will play at the polls in November will come from their hometowns. It is there, at the grassroots, that a growing number of activists are organizing with an eye toward communicating to Congress that, as Wisconsinite Keith Schmitz says, "It's OK to oppose the war." Schmitz helped qualify an antiwar referendum for the ballot in Shorewood, a Milwaukee suburb that is one of thirty Wisconsin communities voting this spring on whether to leave Iraq. The referendum campaign, which organizers hope will serve as a model for similar efforts in more states, coincides with a renewed push by antiwar campaigners to get city councils to call for an end to the war. Coordinated by the Washington-based Institute for Policy Studies, this "Cities for Peace" push has picked up steam in recent months, with seventy-six local governments, including those of Chicago, Philadelphia and Sacramento, urging, in the words of a resolution passed unanimously by the Baltimore City Council, "President Bush and the United States Congress to commence a humane, orderly, immediate and comprehensive withdrawal of United States military personnel and bases from Iraq."

Activists are also trying to communicate to members of Congress through home-state political parties, labor unions and places of worship. Progressive Democrats of America has successfully lobbied seven state Democratic parties to endorse withdrawal. US Labor Against the War and individual unions convinced last year's AFL-CIO convention to call for the "rapid" withdrawal of US troops from Iraq, and state federations, labor councils and local unions have stepped up efforts to deliver that message across the country. Almost three dozen mainstream Christian denominations signed a February letter that signaled a more aggressive antiwar line, stating, "We have failed to raise a prophetic voice loud enough and persistent enough to deter our leaders from this path of preemptive war." That move followed a call from the Union of Reform Judaism for an exit strategy and, perhaps most important, for congregations around the country to promote a deeper dialogue about the war and how to end it.

Such efforts are not a replacement for national actions. Marches still matter, as do campaigns like the joint effort by United for Peace and Justice (UFPJ) and MediaChannel.org to protest jingoistic coverage of the war by major media outlets and the "Women Say No to War" petition drive organized by Code Pink. Even with polls suggesting that the majority of Americans think the Iraq mission has gone badly awry, war foes in many regions still feel isolated, and high-profile national initiatives signal there is an antiwar movement that citizens can and should join.

It's no secret, however, that some leading antiwar groups have clashed over tactics and policies. Before a joint antiwar demonstration in Washington this past September, the UFPJ and the Act Now to Stop War and End Racism (ANSWER) coalitions had to agree not to attack each other. This spring, while both groups are calling for a mass demonstration April 29 in New York, it remains unclear exactly how they will work together. Groups like MoveOn.org, Democracy for America and Progressive Demo-

crats for America are all looking for ways to make the war more of a political issue and to get Democrats to offer a coherent opposition. But PDA is taking an aggressive stance in favor of a quick withdrawal and an exploration of the impeachment of President Bush and Vice President Cheney, while the other groups have put more energy into broad criticism of the mishandling of the war as part of a wider critique of GOP rule at home and abroad. A new group, Voters for Peace, will make a push for unity with a new education campaign aimed straight at progressive voters, asking them to sign an election-year pledge (inspired, organizers say, by a *Nation* editorial) that says, "I will not vote for or support any candidate for national office who does not make a speedy end to the war in Iraq, and preventing any future war of aggression, a public position in his or her campaign."

Divisions at the national level do have parallels in local antiwar movements. But those differences tend to be subsumed in targeted local campaigns that seek to achieve tangible goals, particularly if those campaigns have the potential to influence individual members of Congress. In Wisconsin, for instance, the referendum drive has benefited from an unprecedented level of unity among Greens, Democrats and even a few Republicans. Borrowing a tactic often used by conservatives seeking to stir up debates about tax policy or same-sex marriage, antiwar activists gathered the thousands of petition signatures required to force referendum votes in cities, suburbs and rural areas on resolutions that, while worded differently from town to town, essentially say: Bring the troops home. The Wisconsin campaigners don't expect the White House to announce an exit strategy based on a few dozen referendum results, but they do expect home-state Representatives to take notice. The referendums will be held April 4, in conjunction with local elections. If the Wisconsin initiative proves to be as successful as a similar effort last year in Vermont—where fifty of fifty-four town meetings that voted on antiwar resolutions adopted them, prompting even the state's Republican governor to acknowledge concerns about the deployment of Vermont National Guard units to Iraq—activists with the Wisconsin Network for Peace and Justice hope to influence moderate Democratic Senator Herb Kohl to join Senator Russ Feingold in backing withdrawal. They also talk of influencing Representative Tom Petri, a GOP moderate who's broken with the Administration on some military spending issues, to join the expanding bloc of GOP war critics.

Even as they focus on the upcoming votes, the Wisconsin activists are consulting with antiwar campaigners in other states, hoping that the referendum model will be broadly emulated. "This is really about bringing the debate about the war home," says Ann Hippensteel, a Green who helped qualify referendums in four villages and one city in traditionally Republican Door County. "The more communities say no, the more members of Congress should start wondering whether they should keep listening to the White House or start listening to the people they're supposed to represent."

JOHN NICHOLS

For more on antiwar activities and successful campaigns around the country, see Katrina vanden Heuvel and Sam Graham-Felsen's "Sweet Victories" in Editor's Cut at www.thenation.com.

A Dragon Slayer Returns

Pete McCloskey earned a permanent place in American history when, in 1973, he became the first Republican member of Congress to call for Richard Nixon's impeachment and for US withdrawal from Vietnam. As a highly decorated veteran of the Korean War, McCloskey's criticisms of Washington's errors in Vietnam carried special weight; today, he sees those errors being repeated in Iraq. He recently met with young marines from his old company, Company C, which, according to McCloskey, has lost one-quarter of its men since the Iraq War began. "Every one of these guys told me the same thing," he says: "There's no way we're winning the hearts and minds of these people, when we're pulling them out of bed in the middle of the night and killing family members."

The Iraq War is one of the reasons McCloskey, now 78, has come out of retirement to run again for Congress. In a primary election this June, he will face Richard Pombo, a seven-term incumbent from California and close ally of former House majority leader Tom DeLay, who had to step down after being indicted for campaign finance violations. Although Iraq will surely figure in the race—McCloskey, like Pennsylvania Democrat John Murtha, favors pulling US troops out within a year—McCloskey says the main reason he decided to challenge Pombo is that Pombo personifies the pay-to-play corruption, ideological fanaticism and anti-environmentalism that have taken over the Republican Party. "Tom DeLay wouldn't deal with any lobbying firm that didn't employ Republicans and contribute to Republican candidates," says McCloskey, "and Pombo was one of his top lieutenants."

McCloskey points out that Pombo voted to change House ethics rules to shield DeLay from investigation. He further charges that Pombo received \$54,500 in contributions from Jack Abramoff, the Republican lobbyist who pleaded guilty to bribery in January, and his law firm, and says Pombo sponsored a bill giving Congress the power to overrule the Supreme Court on matters of constitutional law. Finally, Pombo, chair of the House Resources Committee, sponsored a revision of the Endangered Species Act that McCloskey, who helped write the law in the 1970s, says

would "gut the act." Pombo's revision, which passed the House last fall and awaits Senate action this spring, has enraged environmental groups. Defenders of Wildlife calls Pombo a "villain" on Capitol Hill and, with the Sierra Club, has pledged to unseat him this year. "To get the full flavor of this sombitch," McCloskey says, "look at how his bill puts a five-year moratorium on [the Endangered Species Act's] regulation of pesticides. The bald eagle nearly disappeared because of DDT. Now it's recovering because we regulated DDT. Who makes pesticides? Monsanto." McCloskey claims that a foundation financed by Monsanto and the Japanese Whaling Association illegally gave Pombo \$23,000 of travel money to attend the International Whaling Conference.

What's more, Pombo's revision of the Endangered Species Act would in essence require the government to overpay landowners to obey the law. If the government prohibited a landowner from, say, building a shopping mall because it would endanger a plant or animal species, the government would have to pay the landowner compensation equal to the projected profits on the project. The result would be an open-ended giveaway that would bankrupt the Fish and Wildlife Service and render the act unenforceable, which, says McCloskey, "is exactly what Pombo wants."

Wayne Johnson, an adviser to Pombo, says McCloskey "doesn't understand the bill" and that his other accusations are "just not true." Pombo received only \$7,000 from Abramoff, which he later donated to charity, Johnson says, and all of his travel was legal.

Insiders say McCloskey doesn't stand a chance against Pombo. But so far the old marine is two for two at slaying ethically compromised Republican dragons: besides Nixon, McCloskey torpedoed Pat Robertson's 1988 presidential campaign by revealing that the Christian leader had lied about his military record—Robertson actually never faced combat; he served as the company liquor officer after his father, a senator, pulled strings to keep him away from the front lines. Against Pombo, McCloskey promises "a gutsy, grassroots campaign" to counter an expected 4-to-1 funding disparity. "If enough people go to petemccloskey.com to make a donation or volunteer, and if the truth about Pombo gets out to people in the district, we can win," he says. "Somebody has to stand up to this guy."

MARK HERTSGAARD

Mark Hertsgaard, Nation environment correspondent and a Nation Institute fellow, is the author, most recently, of Earth Odyssey: Around the World in Search of Our Environmental Future and The Eagle's Shadow: Why America Fascinates and Infuriates the World.

CALVIN TRILLIN

GEORGE BUSH'S APPROVAL RATING SINKS TO 34 PERCENT

Most pols would find another path to take
Or look for policies they might forsake,
For those are numbers they could not abide.
But those pols don't have Jesus on their side.

Leaking Bubble

"Housing inflation is the American national religion," as the late market pundit Ed Hart of the late *Financial News Network* used to say. And as everyone knows, we've been going through a particularly pious phase for the past few years. But it's looking like the housing religion is on the verge of a crisis of faith.

By just about any metric, the past several years have seen the most extraordinary boom in the US housing market in history, rivaling the dot-com stock market madness of the late 1990s.

COMMENT

In the third quarter of 2005, the average new house sold in the United States cost 4.9 times the average household's yearly income, up from 3.9 in the late 1990s and eclipsing the previous record of 4.3 set in 1989. But it's not just price that set records last year—it's also the rate of turnover. Turnover of new and existing houses in the third quarter of last year was more than 16 percent of GDP, way above its long-term average of 9 to 10 percent, and easily beating the levels reached in the housing frenzies of the 1970s and '80s.

But that's not all, as they say on TV. People haven't merely been buying houses, they've been conducting scary experiments in financial innovation. Time was, you had to come up with a hefty down payment to buy a house. No longer: In 2005 the median first-time buyer put down only 2 percent of the sales price, and 43 percent made no down payment at all. And almost a third of new mortgages in 2004 and '05 were at adjustable rates (because the initial payments are lower than on fixed-rate loans). At earlier peaks interest rates were near cyclical highs, but the past few years have seen the lowest interest rates in a generation. So adjustable mortgages are likely to adjust only one way: up.

But there's more! People haven't been borrowing aggressively merely to buy houses—they've been borrowing against the appreciated value to buy all kinds of other stuff. Americans have been using their houses as MasterCards, turning about \$726 billion of their home equity into (borrowed) cash between 2001 and 2005. That's a big number, even by the standards of the US economy; it's equal to almost 40 percent of the growth in personal spending, and a nice compensation for the failure of the economy to generate new jobs at a vigorous pace. But since we're saving nothing these days—the personal savings rate went negative in 2005 for the first time since the Great Depression—the cash had to come from abroad. Since 2001 US foreign debt has increased by a stunning \$2 trillion.

One thing can be said for the housing mania: It's kept the economy afloat since the bursting of the stock market bubble in 2000. (Wall Street economists estimate that 40 to 50 percent of the growth in GDP and employment over the last several years has been driven by the housing boom.) When the dot-coms went up in smoke, Alan Greenspan's Federal Reserve drove interest rates down to 1 percent to contain the economic fallout. But that "cure" is what got the housing mania going; low interest rates made borrowing irresistible, and the nation's speculative spirits were diverted away from Wall Street and toward home sweet home.

But now that all looks like it's coming to an end, thanks in part to the Fed's round of interest-rate increases. Sales volumes are slowing, prices are flattening or even declining, mortgage demand is easing and the inventory of unsold houses is rising.

So what's next? Deflating the housing bubble is likely to take some time. The housing market isn't like the stock market; it's a lot slower, and it's harder to dump one's house in a panic than 1,000 shares of Pets.com. But removing the stimulus responsible for about half the economy's recent growth has to have an effect. That effect could be anything from a mild drag on an already limp economy to a real financial crisis. What it is depends on whether other sectors pick up some of the slack—say, if businesses were to start hiring and investing rather than hoarding their plentiful cash or distributing it to their stockholders.

If they don't, things could get quite unpleasant. So many households have taken on so much mortgage debt that if prices merely stop rising, they're going to find themselves under water. And the broad economy has become so dependent on home-equity credit that its withdrawal could come as a terrible shock. Maybe the economy will finally have to face the consequences of the collapse of the 1990s stock-driven boom that it managed to avoid by speculating on housing instead. In fact, the main thing arguing against that possibility is the economy's stunning ability to evade its dates with destiny time after time.

DOUG HENWOOD

Doug Henwood, a Nation contributing editor, is the editor of Left Business Observer. His latest book is *After the New Economy*; he's in the early phases of a study of the American ruling class.

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COMMENT

Helping China's Censors

While working in China in the late 1990s, I happened to read Timothy Garton Ash's *The File*. In East Germany after the Berlin wall fell, East Germans were suddenly able to access their Stasi police files. Police informants included neighbors, lovers, spouses and even people's own children. After I described the book to Chinese friends, one remarked: "That day will come in China too. Then I'll know who my real friends are."

Today China's leaders are fighting hard not to follow their East German and Soviet counterparts into the dustbin of history. Chinese censors, enlisting the help of private Internet companies—both domestic and foreign—have been working overtime to block and remove content that challenges the Chinese Communist Party's authority. But they can't keep up with the viral spread of information in cyberspace.

The question is not whether the Chinese Communist Party will succeed in hanging on to power; it's: For how long? And when change comes, will Chinese people thank companies like Google, Microsoft, Yahoo! and Cisco for bringing them the Internet as a catalyst for freedom, or will they curse them for having helped a corrupt and unaccountable regime hold power longer than it might have? Will they mutter about hypocrites who talked a big game about freedom and democracy—but who weren't willing to forgo a cent of profit to help non-Americans realize those ideals?

In February Google, Microsoft, Yahoo! and Cisco were called on the carpet in a Congressional hearing for aiding Chinese government efforts to censor the Internet, monitor its citizens and suppress dissent online. Cisco sells high-tech communications systems, including surveillance systems, to the Chinese police. Yahoo! offers a heavily censored Chinese search engine. It has turned over to the police e-mail account information on at least three dissidents, from a service hosted on computer servers inside China. Microsoft heavily censors blogs of Chinese users on MSN spaces. Google has rolled out a politically sanitized Chinese search engine (although unlike Yahoo! it notifies users that it is censoring). It has opted not to offer Chinese-language e-mail and blogging services to avoid the predicaments of Yahoo! and Microsoft.

Efforts are now under way to make it illegal for US companies to help the Chinese government suppress free speech. Draft legislation for the Global Online Freedom Act of 2006 includes provisions that would forbid storage of user data on servers inside China, would make it illegal to sell equipment or services to law-enforcement agencies in countries like China and would enable victims of Yahoo!'s police collaboration to sue Yahoo! in US court. These things all make sense. But other provisions are misguided. The act would require US Internet companies to hand over all lists of forbidden words provided to them by "any foreign official of an Internet-restricting country" (as defined by the State Department) to a specially created US government office. It would also require companies to report all content deleted or blocked at the request of the host government to the same government office. This would put US companies in a tough position in foreign markets if they are perceived to be US government

stooges—which this act would in effect require them to be. The act would also result in US companies handing over Chinese user information to the US government. Why would we ask companies to do that, when many Americans don't trust the government with our own personal data? Aren't we better off setting global standards to protect all users from all governments everywhere?

Some Chinese bloggers were encouraged by the Congressional hearings because they called attention to the evil effects of corporate censorship, surveillance and police collaboration. But some also found them patronizing. Blogger Zhao Jing wrote: "The bill to be submitted about freedom of Internet information treats the freedom of Chinese Internet users as a slave girl to be dressed as you please."

We shouldn't allow US firms to act in ways that contradict fundamental American values. But we must act in a way that respects the rights of people in other countries as much as we respect our own rights. The Global Online Freedom Act of 2006 is the beginning of a conversation about what needs to be done. But in its current form, it shouldn't be the last word. REBECCA MACKINNON

Rebecca MacKinnon, a research fellow at Harvard Law School's Berkman Center for Internet and Society, is a former CNN Beijing bureau chief. A longer version appears at www.thenation.com.

NATION NOTES

PHOTO NATION. With this issue, we begin a new series, Photo Nation. The first photo essay and accompanying text are by Eugene Richards, a photojournalist and filmmaker who is the author of *Stepping Through the Ashes* (Aperture) and *The Fat Baby* (Phaidon). Richards is a fellow at The Nation Institute. Research support was provided by the Investigative Fund of The Nation Institute.

PRIZES. We're looking for thoughtful, provocative student voices to tell us what issue most concerns their generation. Essays shouldn't exceed 800 words and should be previously unpublished work that demonstrates fresh, clear thinking and superior craftsmanship. The winning entry will be published in *The Nation*, and the winner will receive \$500. Five finalists will be published at thenation.com. Deadline: March 31. Send entries to: studentprize@thenation.com (for more information go to www.thenation.com/student).

AWARDS. Bryan Farrell has won the Gertrude Blumenthal Kasbekar Fellowship for his web article on NASA climatologist James Hansen's refusal to let the Bush Administration mute his work on global warming (www.thenation.com). The award is given to *Nation* interns who conduct research on science and healthcare issues.

ON THE WEB. The Notion, *The Nation's* new blog, features Richard Kim's comments on the uproar that greeted a *Harper's* article by an AIDS denier. Marking International Women's Day, Cynthia Enloe reports on protests by antiwar feminists against the increasing militarization of American society and the attendant cult of masculinity.

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I had recently ordered and received a Balanced Spectrum floor lamp. I am really amazed at the difference it makes in lighting. Ordinary bulbs and lamps pale in comparison to the Balanced Spectrum floor lamp. As soon as I turned on the lamp and began to read the newspaper I could see the wonderful difference. This lamp is just what I needed. Thanks you so much. I've also been telling a lot of my friends about this lamp.

Donna E.

Being a commercial photographer, I probably give more attention to lighting than most people and therefore was impressed with the smooth soft daylight quality of your lamp. Another feature I liked was its ability for dual intensity, good at the low setting for reading and high intensity as a detail work light. Congratulations on such a practical and attractive product.

Dennis M.

For the sewing and knitting that I do, this is the best lamp I've found.

Kari K.

With this new lamp, there is absolutely no glare and my wife can read without her reading glasses.

Gerry S.

I am a happy camper. Once again I can decipher those pesky little numbers on a crossword puzzle. No more filling in 35 Across when it should have been 38 Across. Can you imagine the frustration avoided. Moreover, I can enjoy again a paperback with small print. My reading options have increased.

Jack W.

The lamp brought sunlight inside and, my mother found she could see her handwork much better. So for Christmas she decided to buy floor lamps for each of her three married children. I like the way it goes behind any chair and it is light weight and easy to move to other locations. I haven't moved the lamp, but found myself going to that chair with the floor lamp to read and do my handwork.

My two aunts bought themselves one because of my mother's testimony about the brightness without the heat. When my granddaughter went off to college, my mother couldn't think of a better gift and she was right. My granddaughter loves it! My mother knows what she will get the next college student— a Balanced Spectrum floor lamp. It is a perfect gift for any occasion.

Mary L.

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ALEXANDER COCKBURN

Democrats: When the War Was Lost

Here we are in early 2006, and the headlines are briefly given over to the disclosure that the oil companies could end up underpaying their royalties for drilling on American public lands by \$7 billion.

There was a time, a generation ago, when people here in the United States thought and wrote about the underpinning of the US economy—the energy industry—in a serious way. In the mid-1970s the country was bustling with groups pushing for public control, for extending the regulatory powers of the Federal Trade Commission over natural gas prices, for breakup of the oil companies.

In came Carter, and up went the solar collectors on the White House roof. Aside from that, it was downhill all the way. The oil companies spent millions to winch themselves out of the PR debacle of the oil embargo of 1973–'74, in which the public rightly perceived them as eager co-conspirators with OPEC in price-gouging and profiteering.

By the time Carter surrendered the White House and its solar panels to Reagan (who swiftly tore them down; five years later they wound up at Unity College in Maine), the first decisive counterattacks had taken place. The FTC's wings were clipped and the oil industry was positioning itself for the next great bonanza: in the Gulf of Mexico, the outer continental shelf off the California coast and Prudhoe Bay, which had just come on line. The trans-Alaska pipeline had been built and Alaska primed for the taking. In the interior West the oil shale deposits of the Rocky Mountain Front were awaiting the green light and the public subsidies.

For the oilmen the overarching political task was to get Congress to surrender all effective public control and concentrate on the simple business of handing out subsidies. On private lands the oilmen had the depletion allowance, one of the great wonders of the world. On public lands the equivalent would be to spare the oil companies the burden of paying any royalties on the oil they were taking out of the ground.

The Reagan years were spent clearing away any inconvenient regulatory underbrush. While the liberals cheered the downfall of Interior chief James Watt—and the Sierra Club raised royalty-free millions by putting his sour visage on their mailers—the oil industry patiently pushed ahead, prompting its champions in Congress to prepare the ground for the struggles ahead. The strike force was to be a Louisiana/Alaska axis.

In came the Clinton crowd, briefly flapping its banner of economic populism. By the summer of 1993 the banner was furled, populism in pell-mell retreat and the sustainability of the corporate bottom line dead center in the Clinton agenda.

In the summer of 1996 the President played host to a coven of oil company executives during his preconvention vacation in Jackson Hole, Wyoming. The executives were incandescent in the flush of a victory they had schemed for over the previous decade. Bennett Johnston and the Alaskans had scored one of



the most significant victories for the oil industry in the twentieth century. The fruits of their triumph was called the Federal Oil and Gas Royalty Simplification and Fairness Act. Beyond this demure title were a series of provisions waiving all royalties due the American Treasury from the oil companies.

Finally approved by Congress in mid-August 1996, the law did four things: It placed a seven-year limit on the auditing of oil company books recording income from drilling on public lands; it turned over many of the auditing responsibilities for drill-

ing on federal lands to the states; it permitted the oil companies to sue the federal government to collect interest on "overpayments"; and it allowed those very same companies to set the "market price" of the crude oil upon which the royalty payments to the federal government are based. In reality, the bill legalized a scam the big oil companies had been running for decades, underpaying royalties on crude oil extracted from federal lands, including the Alaskan oilfields.

Typically, Clinton cast the measure as simply a way of cutting government red tape and streamlining needless bureaucracy. Amid the cheers, the oil company executives laid out to the obedient President the next stages of their agenda. They wanted to open up the national reserve in Alaska, to expand drilling in the Gulf of Mexico and to overturn the twenty-three-year ban on the export of Alaskan crude oil, a provision deemed necessary decades earlier to win passage of the original pipeline bill.

The quid pro quo was a tidal wave of political contributions, Arco in the lead, into the Democratic Party treasury. Not long thereafter the chairman of Arco, Lodwick Cook, was celebrating his birthday in the White House Rose Garden, with Clinton carrying in the cake. Twenty years after their nadir in the early 1970s, the oil companies had won it all.

By the mid-1990s the oil industry no longer had any effective foes arguing for public control. Senators like Abourezk and Metzenbaum had gone. The public interest groups were successfully unplugged during Clinton time, and the credibility of proposals for public control of the nation's energy resources were undermined by years of neoliberal derision coming from groups like the Natural Resources Defense Council and the Environmental Defense Fund, which saw higher prices as the key to conservation and whose endorsement helped launch Enron on the world.

Today Exxon can schedule a net profit of nearly \$100 billion for 2006 and it's a three-day butt of the nightly talk shows. Meanwhile there are a few news snippets about a 3,600-mile pipeline scheduled to go from Prudhoe Bay, across Canada and down into the Midwest. There's not a political ripple to be seen. The green groups are silent, even though the project is three and a half times the length of the original Alaska pipeline, whose scheduled construction in the early 1970s prompted a savage political battle.

And yes, there are also stories about the Democrats being short of ideas. The ideas got flushed down the drain in Carter time. These battles were lost long, long ago. ■

ARTICLES

AFGHANISTAN

Our Humvee jolts and sways against another cold dirt track in Parwan Province, an hour north of Kabul. On the road thin shadows from barren winter orchards lie like dark lacework and flicker across the Humvee's hood and windshield.

A landscape of adobe-walled villages, empty fields, horse carts and dramatic sharp mountains slides by. Inside the armored Humvee we listen to music on a dusty iPod and two speakers that are jacked into the vehicle's nervous system. Lynyrd Skynyrd's "Sweet Home Alabama" rolls up on the iPod. The lyrics, though older than most of the soldiers on this patrol, capture the squad's mix of homesickness and political cynicism: "Now Watergate does not bother me/Does your conscience bother you?" No one talks much about Afghanistan.

I am riding along with these two Humvees from the 164th Military Police Company to observe the American effort at keeping a lid on the Afghan caldron. I also want to compare US methods with those of the European troops who are taking over an ever larger part of the military mission here.

Specialist Willie Stacey stands in the gun turret on the SAW-249 machine gun. He taps his foot to the music's rhythm, and to the slight twinge of fear that animates us all. Four nights ago this unit was sprayed down with small arms fire,

and earlier one of their number lost his leg to a landmine.

Only ninety-eight US troops died in Afghanistan last year; but the ratio of US casualties to overall troop levels makes Afghanistan as dangerous as Iraq. While Iraq's violent disintegration dominates the headlines, Bush touts Afghanistan as a success. During his recent visit, the President told Afghans that their country was "inspiring others...to demand their freedom."

But many features of the political landscape here are not so inspiring—for example, the deteriorating security situation. Taliban attacks are up; their tactics have become more aggressive and nihilistic. They have detonated at least twenty-three suicide bombs in the past six months, killing foreign and Afghan troops, a Canadian diplomat, local police and in some cases crowds

of civilians. Kidnapping is on the rise. American contractors are being tar-

geted. Some 200 schools have been burned or closed down. And Lieut. Gen. Karl Eikenberry, the senior American military officer here, expects the violence to get worse over the spring and summer.

Even in the once relatively stable northern and western regions of the country, foreign military bases and patrols are coming under sporadic attack, while civilian traffic faces a sharp rise in violent banditry. One security monitoring organization

CHRISTIAN PARENTI

THE OTHER WAR

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said they had seen a fourfold increase in such crimes over the past year.

The backdrop to this gathering crisis is Afghanistan's shattered economy. The country's 24 million people are still totally dependent on foreign aid, opium poppy cultivation and remittances sent home by the 5 million Afghans living abroad. Yes, there is a new luxury hotel in Kabul, but Afghanistan ranks fifth from the bottom on the UNDP's Human Development Index. Only a few sub-Saharan semi-failed states are more destitute, more broken down.

Since late 2001 the international community—that consortium of highly industrialized nations, international financial institutions, aid organizations and UN agencies that in concert manage the world's disaster zones—has spent \$8 billion on emergency relief and reconstruction in Afghanistan. That's a lot of money, perhaps, but given what the World Bank has called the aid sector's "sky-high wastage" and the country's endemic poverty, it's simply not enough.

In the face of Afghanistan's deepening troubles, the US government is now slashing its funding for reconstruction from a peak of \$1 billion in 2004 to a mere \$615 million this year. And thanks to the military's recruitment problems, the United States is drawing down its troops from 19,000 to 16,000. In short, despite Bush's feel-good rhetoric, the United States is giving every impression that it is slowly abandoning sideshow Afghanistan.

To pick up the slack, the primarily European- and Canadian-staffed, NATO-led International Security Assistance Force is increasing its troop levels from about 9,000 to 15,000. On the economic front an additional \$10.5 billion in aid has been pledged for the next five years—\$1.1 billion of that promised by the United States; the rest from Japan, the European Union, international institutions and seventy other donor nations.

Many European states see America's unsuccessful wars in Iraq and Afghanistan as an opportunity to impress upon Uncle Sam that he must cooperate more with his junior partners—that he must give a bit more to the interests of the other rich economies. So they are moving in to help the United States by taking over as much responsibility as they can in Afghanistan. But the Europeans look at this opportunity with tremendous trepidation.

As one French diplomat working with the EU in Kabul put it: "The European powers all had to be dragged in one by one, kicking and screaming. They want to be the good allies and create obligation with the US, show their power, but they are very worried about casualties, about domestic fallout and about the costs and possible failure."

Many observers hope that a European-led counterinsurgency strategy will be more sophisticated and effective than current American methods, which are rightly criticized as heavy-handed, overly focused on military means, inflexible, culturally insensitive

and badly marred by the torture and murder of prisoners at the Bagram detention facility. The next five years—with a new round of funding and an infusion of fresh European troops—are seen as Afghanistan's last chance to stanch the growing Taliban insurgency and build a functioning state. Will it work?

The MPs from the 164th have a relatively straightforward but important job: to secure the Shomali Plain and the mountains surrounding the Bagram Air Base so that no one fires rockets into the base or shoots down any of its air traffic. To do this, the MPs use information-oriented tactics common throughout Afghanistan.

Counterinsurgency doctrine, such as it is, holds that military action must be guided by accurate knowledge: not just "actionable intelligence" about specific threats but also a generalized, almost ethnographic, understanding of everyday life in the area of operations. What are the local grievances? Who is in charge? Where are the wells?

Learn these things, and the occupying forces can map not only the physical terrain but also the social world they must control, the community power structures and local economies. With this knowledge the occupying forces can effectively direct both economic development and, when necessary, military repression. Thus, part of what these MPs do is conduct village surveys to create an overview of life on the Shomali Plain. Or at least that's the idea.

When I chat with the MP's platoon leader, a lieutenant who has spent almost eleven months patrolling this valley, I am shocked that he doesn't even know its ethnic makeup. "I think they're Dari," he says. Informed that Dari is a language, not an ethnicity, he tells me to ask one of the Afghan interpreters. "The 'terps know. These guys are smart."

Moments later an MP learns that the 'terps have suddenly been barred from the dining facilities on security grounds. "What the fuck? They've been eating there for a year," says a GI. "They're gonna be pissed."

The pre-patrol briefing is perfunctory; little information about recent activity is passed on to the troops. Two days earlier the Bagram Air Base had been attacked by a mob infuriated by the Danish Muhammad cartoons. Someone in the crowd opened fire on the gates. Three protesters were killed when Afghan forces and American MPs returned fire. The meaning or possible implications of these events are not mentioned before we roll out.

After a day of meandering through the valley, we reach the village of Kham Rubah Pan, where the patrol leader, Sergeant Chesley, has decided to do a village survey. One side of the road is hemmed in by a high mud wall, the other by a small creek and a line of tall, naked trees.

The survey questions range from "Who is the local leader?" to "Where is the closest clinic?" to "Are there any ACM [anti-coalition militants] in the area?" The answers are pretty bleak: no good well, no school, no clinic, no work. But at least there are no ACM reported in the village.

One of the older men answering the survey, a returnee from the refugee camps in Pakistan, launches into a long tirade. "We

Despite Bush's feel-good rhetoric, the United States is giving every impression that it is slowly abandoning sideshow Afghanistan.

Christian Parenti is the author of The Freedom: Shadows and Hallucinations in Occupied Iraq (New Press) and a visiting fellow at CUNY's Center for Place, Culture and Politics. Research assistance was provided by the Investigative Fund of The Nation Institute.

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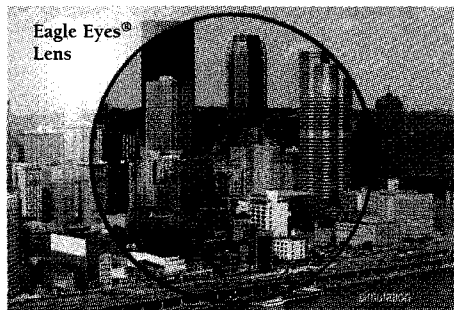
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—Dr. Lyda D. Tymiak”

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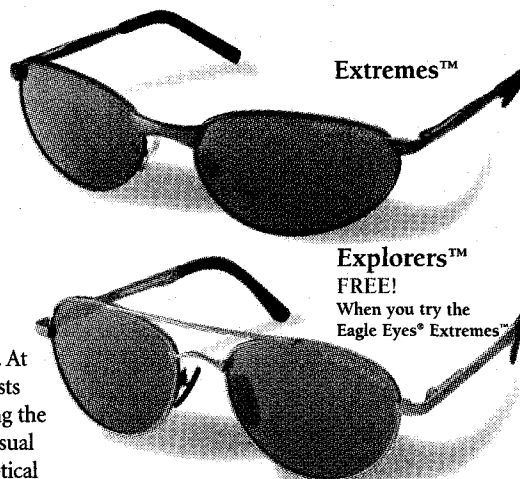
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have seen nothing from this government. We can't get to Karzai. The ministries do nothing."

As consolation, Sergeant Chesley begins an aid handout. All the GIs on this patrol have mixed feelings about aid giveaways. "There are villages where they throw themselves in front of our Humvees demanding food and blankets because we've created a welfare mentality," says Chesley. But his instructions are to occasionally give things away, especially in villages where no previous surveys have been conducted.

As the windup radios, blankets and gloves come out, the gaggle of men listening to the survey conversation suddenly swells to a boisterous crowd. The narrow road between the mud wall and the small creek is now full of men and children. There are no women over 15 in sight. Pandemonium is immediate.

Chesley and a village elder attempt to impose order, but it's useless. Every object handed out is seized by several competing men. Shouting children squirm around underfoot. Two younger men start punching each other over a pair of gloves; Chesley and a local intervene to break it up. Now the loser, a skinny guy in a loose *shaweer kamis* and a Nike ski cap, not only lacks gloves but has hurt pride. More goods come out of the Humvee. A teenager assaults an older man who has just grabbed a blanket; the elder emerges with the blanket but loses his turban. People press in as the victors carry off their trophies.

I jump up on one of the Humvees and shoot video from the safety of the roof. The crowd below is a churning mass of desperation, poverty, hunger and the broken-up pieces of traditional, hierarchical Afghan society.

When we finally pull out of the village, a trail of young boys and men jogging and riding bicycles follows us for about half a mile. Occasionally, one of the GIs throws an MRE out the window. I ride in the gun turret with Specialist Stacey. As far as I can see, the whole pathetic spectacle of the aid handout has had no positive political or cultural impact. "They call us infidels, but they're begging for blankets," says Stacey in his Alabama drawl. He shakes his head and tips a bag of M&Ms into his mouth.

Can the Europeans do any better than the US forces? Attempting to find out, I fly to a Lithuanian base called a PRT, for Provincial Reconstruction Team. These small military bases aim to mix peacekeeping and reconnaissance with development work and political support for fledgling local government institutions like the police and the provincial governor's offices.

I board a huge Dutch-operated C-130 transport plane and fly from Kabul over the rocky snowbound peaks of the central highlands to a rolling plateau in the middle of the country. Strapped into the flip-down seats along the sides of the plane's dark cargo bay is a motley assortment of bearded European soldiers, clean-cut American GIs, private contractors and mysterious armed men in civilian clothes. Landing at Chagcharan, Ghor Province, is like stepping out onto the moon: Not a tree or bush can be seen for miles.

The European troops work hard to build bridges to the locals, growing beards, taking off their boots indoors, learning some Dari.

The largest, poorest, least-populated province in Afghanistan, Ghor is a frozen, muddy desert inaccessible by road for much of the winter. Isolation sends local prices soaring and leaves Ghor's population in permanent debt to merchants and landlords. A thousand years ago this place was heavily forested, but its hills also held mineral deposits, so Ghor's trees were felled and burned to smelt the ore. Then the denuded region became the heart of Afghanistan's medieval cattle industry. Now Ghor is so stripped down that the only fuel available to most people are small bushes gathered during the summer from faraway hills. At an altitude of 9,000 feet, even the air is thin.

The Lithuanian-run PRT also includes a small Danish contingent. I am assigned to one of their squads, called a Mobile Liaison and Observation Team, or MLOT. These teams of six soldiers riding in two SUVs are the PRT's main means of operation. Their job is similar to that of the American squad I had

been embedded with on the Shomali Plain. The MLOTs here comb their terrain of operations, driving for up to a week at a time, patrolling from village to village,

gathering information, mapping the region's strengths and weaknesses, building links to the local population and letting people know that the foreign supporters of the central government are out and about with their guns, grenade launchers and who knows what else.

The information collected by the MLOTs is all digested by the PRT's intelligence and civil affairs sections and plotted on large maps and computer spreadsheets. "This will create institutional memory!" says a huge, enthusiastic Lithuanian civil affairs officer named Aleksiejus Gaizevskis. His databases track the whole province's vast array of needs, and he correlates all this on the wall-mounted maps. In the intelligence tent the walls contain a tree graph of the local power structure, illustrated with snapshots of Ghor's warlords. If violence flares, this information will help guide the military response. The accumulated knowledge is also supposed to help coordinate the efforts of NGOs and help avoid redundant efforts. But there are hardly any NGOs here.

One of the most difficult parts of the mission is collaborating with local authorities. The Danish intelligence chief describes the police commander as "the biggest crook out here." The governor, on the other hand, is seen as honest but weak.

The next morning, we set out across the empty hills in the SUVs of the Danish MLOT. A year ago two local warlords fought a pitched battle in Chagcharan, but the area has been quiet since then. The Danes are out to do a village survey and distribute some newspapers.

Unlike the American patrol, with its sloppy, halfhearted, ultimately divisive handouts, the Danes and Lithuanians limit their aid work to a few well-thought-out emergency-response projects: heat for an orphanage, shoes for the children of a displaced persons' camp, a few other things.

The European troops work hard to build bridges to the locals, growing beards, taking off their boots for indoor meetings, learning some Dari. And their sympathy seems genuine.

"I understand why everyone is armed," says Capt. Bo Jepsen

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while we wait for one of his vehicles to be towed out of the mud. "There is no law and order out here. They have to protect themselves."

At points on our patrol through the moonscape dotted with villages, I interview several local people. All are brutally frank: It's been four years with no real change. They desperately want a better road so they can reach Herat to the west and Kabul to the east. Their sense of isolation borders on panic.

Later, in the civil affairs tent, a young USAID rep tells me he's lobbying his superiors to set up a micro-credit scheme. The guy, who is not supposed to be talking to me, has a bunch of other ideas. But in the past four years this province of around 670,000 people has received only \$6 million in USAID funding. With so little money invested here, many of the NGOs that arrived in the first wave after the US intervention have now pulled out.

This, ultimately, is the problem: Afghanistan is very poor, and the international occupation here is not doing enough to change that. Even if the Europeans go in with a sensitive approach and deploy their best troops, limited money will mean little or no progress.

Back in Kabul I get an interview at the US Embassy, where the official mood is all clean-shaven, fresh-pressed optimism, backed up by PowerPoint presentations and development-speak gibberish about stakeholders, capacity-building, business clusters and empowerment. I am allowed to meet a man who knows lots about USAID but whose handler insists he must be identified only as "a US government official." It's a ridiculous inside-the-compound contrivance. The unidentified "US government official" says several interesting things: Yes, USAID has problems with bureaucratic ossification. Yes, there is corruption in Afghanistan. But his final candid point is most important: USAID money for Afghanistan this year will be half what it was last year, and because of Iraq and Katrina, everyone in Kabul is "pessimistic" about the size of any midyear supplemental.

As the empire drifts, the Taliban grow stronger. But who are the Taliban, and why are they placing bombs, attacking foreign troops, infiltrating ever deeper into Afghanistan and provoking a crisis for the international occupation? Some say the Taliban are fragmented beyond coherence and don't even exist. Others say they are controlled by Al Qaeda. Still others say both are controlled by the Pakistani intelligence service.

Western reporters rarely make contact with the insurgents. But my colleague and interpreter, Ajmal, thinks we can meet them. He and I hook up with an Afghan TV journalist who was in the Taliban's ministry of information and still maintains contact with the Taliban in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. He is a rogue and a lush with no real political beliefs. We'll call him Mr. TV.

The plan goes like this: We drive the rather sketchy but newly paved road south into Zabul Province, to the countryside just outside Kandahar. There we bribe the local security commander to get safe passage into a canyon where we meet the Taliban. The security commander is supposed to tell the local American base that any armed men in a certain canyon are paramilitary

police and should not be fired on by passing airplanes.

The trip south is hard, and our truck's alignment is badly out of whack. In Ghazni City we switch to a taxi driven by a young, innocent-looking cabbie. I am wearing a *shaweer kamis*, and he thinks I am Tajik like Ajmal. When I start speaking English, the kid seems nervous. After a few hours Mr. TV tells the kid to proceed to a police commander's compound, where we drop off a payment and some Jim Beam. Then we head out into the desert. Now the kid is really nervous. Mr. TV tells him to drive the cab into a canyon, then to hide the vehicle in a wash. Ajmal, Mr. TV and I bail out and start hiking.

And suddenly there they are: The first Talib is perched up on a slope, dressed in black, cradling an RPG launcher. He's straight from central casting.

There are five of them. They usher us up the side of the canyon into the shade against a wall. I wait for one of them to join us; instead they stand back, their guns trained on our chests. There is an awkward, somewhat terrifying

moment. Then the head Talib, acting as if this is normal, says, "You can start asking your questions." I switch on my little video camera and we begin to talk.

"We are fighting because we won't let the American troops in our land," says the Taliban leader. "If their objectives were to rebuild our country we would not fight against them. But that is not their goal." He thinks America is here to "destroy our country" and "not leave."

How is the Taliban organized? "We are under one leadership. We have several groups, but we work together under one leadership. We have one command, but we have to operate in groups of five or six, because if we gather in groups of fifty we are afraid of the aircrafts. They would destroy us in big groups." This jibes with what an officer in the Afghan National Security Directorate tells me. The NSD officer says the Taliban have three fronts but all answer to one Pakistan-supported and -based leadership.

And what about support from Pakistan? "Yes, Pakistan stands with us," says the leader. "And on that side of the border we have our offices. Pakistan is supporting us, they supply us. Our leaders are there collecting help. The people on this side of the border also support us."

Notably, the Taliban have not adopted full-on Iraq-style tactics of targeting the UN, NGOs and journalists. I ask why they don't attack NGOs. "We don't have any problem with the NGOs that come to help our people. Those who are doing destructive action in our country, we do jihad against them." This appears to confirm the suspicions of many internationals in Afghanistan that the Taliban do not launch all-out attacks on NGOs for fear of alienating the many southern Pashtun Taliban supporters who, though hating foreigners, rely on NGO-funded clinics, drink from NGO-built wells or work as NGO drivers and staff.

The man firmly disavows the recent spate of suicide bombings and the school burnings. And what of Al Qaeda? "They are not with us. They fight, but they are elsewhere."

At one point, sounding like a classic peasant guerrilla with reformist aims, he says: "The central government must assist us, then we will put down our weapons. We are not against every-

The Taliban have not adopted full-on Iraq-style tactics of targeting the UN, NGOs and journalists. I ask them why not.

one. Our main concern is the government. The foreign troops must leave, and there must be an Islamic government."

Then we hear a quiet droning, high in the empty blue sky. "That is a detective aircraft. You should go," says the Taliban leader. We snap a few last photos and beat a hasty retreat out of the canyon.

A few days later Mr. TV, Ajmal and I reach Dr. Mohammed Hanif, one of two Taliban spokesmen who give out their satellite phone numbers to select journalists. The spokesman contradicts the fighters from Zabul on several key points. He claims responsibility for the suicide bombings. "We are changing our tactics. These martyrs are our Taliban." He also takes responsibility for the school burnings, explaining that they want education for women but only when it is "safe." Mixed schools will be burned. His main message is that the Taliban is unified and ramping up its tactics. None of this bodes well for the spring and summer.

Toward the end of my stay I meet a European "contractor" who is in fact a Western intelligence agent in charge of several important dossiers pertaining to Afghan security. All of this is confirmed through Afghan intelligence sources. But my "contractor" friend maintains his pretenses and I remain respectful of that, and we proceed with otherwise very frank conversations.

To my surprise, this agent to the great powers, this builder of empire, is the most cynical person I've met my whole trip. Highly intellectual, he talks of Afghanistan as doomed, a hostage to history and to the idiocy, arrogance and Iraq obsession of the

Bush clique. He passes me a series of "red gaming papers"—intentionally dissenting analyses of the Afghan situation written by and for the coalition.

The papers paint an arrestingly bleak picture of Afghanistan as a political "fiction," a buffer state that no longer buffers, a collection of fiefdoms run by brutal local warlords. The coalition's mission is portrayed as a fantasy game managed by sheltered careerists. One of the papers is by an American. It ends on this note: Nothing short of an open-ended blank check from the United States will keep Afghanistan from returning to chaos.

One of our meetings takes place at a dinner party. The contractor and I get rather drunk and talk politics by a big outdoor fire pit. He sums up the situation with a Kipling poem: "When you're wounded and left on Afghanistan's plains/And the women come out to cut up what remains/Just roll to your rifle and blow out your brains/An' go to your Gawd like a soldier."

I can't believe how grim his view of things is (though he is cheerful), and I keep pushing him to test for exaggeration. "I know an Afghan commander who is with the government and has been at this for quite a long time," says the contractor. "He described the current situation as 1983: The Taliban can't take on armored columns yet, but they are building momentum."

This analogy between the present and 1983 seems a bit unfair. "The mujahedeen had US backing," I suggest. "The Taliban have no superpower patron."

"Yes, but neither does Afghanistan," says the contractor. He fills my glass once more with dark red wine and stares into the flames. ■

WHY DID REPORTERS BECOME WHITE HOUSE CHEERLEADERS IN THE RUN-UP TO THE IRAQ WAR?

Lap Dogs of the Press

HELEN THOMAS

Of all the unhappy trends I have witnessed—conservative swings on television networks, dwindling newspaper circulation, the jailing of reporters and "spin"—nothing is more troubling to me than the obsequious press during the run-up to the invasion of Iraq. They lapped up everything the Pentagon and White House could dish out—no questions asked.

Reporters and editors like to think of themselves as watchdogs for the public good. But in recent years both individual reporters and their ever-growing corporate ownership have defaulted on that role. Ted Stannard, an academic and former UPI correspondent, put it this way: "When watchdogs, bird dogs, and bull dogs morph



KAREN CALDICOTT

into lap dogs, lazy dogs, or yellow dogs, the nation is in trouble."

The naïve complicity of the press and the government was never more pronounced than in the prelude to the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. The media became an echo chamber for White House pronouncements. One example: At President Bush's March 6, 2003, news conference, in which he made it eminently clear that the United States was going to war, one reporter pleased the "born again" Bush when she asked him if he prayed about going to war. And so it went.

After all, two of the nation's most prestigious newspapers, the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, had kept up a drumbeat for war with Iraq to bring down dictator Saddam Hussein. They accepted almost unquestioningly the bogus evidence of weapons of mass destruction, the dubious White House rationale that proved to be so costly on a human scale, not to mention a drain on the Treasury. The *Post* was much more hawkish than the *Times*—running many editorials pumping up

Helen Thomas is a Hearst columnist and dean of the White House press corps. This article is adapted from her forthcoming book, Watchdogs of Democracy? The Waning Washington Press Corps and How It Has Failed the Public. Copyright © 2006 by Helen Thomas. Printed by permission of Scribner, a division of Simon & Schuster, Inc.

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the need to wage war against the Iraqi dictator—but both newspapers played into the hands of the Administration.

When Secretary of State Colin Powell delivered his ninety-minute “boffo” statement on Saddam’s lethal toxic arsenal on February 5, 2003, before the United Nations, the *Times* said he left “little question that Mr. Hussein had tried hard to conceal” a so-called smoking gun or weapons of mass destruction. After two US special weapons inspection task forces, headed by chief weapons inspector David Kay and later by Charles Duelfer, came up empty in the scouring of Iraq for WMD, did you hear any apologies from the Bush Administration? Of course not. It simply changed its rationale for the war—several times. Nor did the media say much about the failed weapons search. Several newspapers made it a front-page story but only gave it one-day coverage. As for Powell, he simply lost his halo. The newspapers played his back-pedaling inconspicuously on the back pages.

My concern is why the nation’s media were so gullible. Did they really think it was all going to be so easy, a “cakewalk,” a superpower invading a Third World country? Why did the Washington press corps forgo its traditional skepticism? Why did reporters become cheerleaders for a deceptive Administration? Could it be that no one wanted to stand alone outside Washington’s pack journalism?

Tribune Media Services editor Robert Koehler summed it up best. In his August 20, 2004, column in the *San Francisco Chronicle* Koehler wrote, “Our print media pacesetters, the *New York Times*, and just the other day, the *Washington Post*, have searched their souls over the misleading pre-war coverage they foisted on the nation last year, and blurted out qualified Reaganesque mea culpas: ‘Mistakes were made.’”

All the blame cannot be laid at the doorstep of the print media. CNN’s war correspondent, Christiane Amanpour, was critical of her own network for not asking enough questions about WMD. She attributed it to the competition for ratings with Fox, which had an inside track to top Administration officials.

Despite the apologies of the mainstream press for not having vigilantly questioned evidence of WMD and links to terrorists in the early stages of the war, the newspapers dropped the ball again by ignoring for days a damaging report in the London *Times* on May 1, 2005. That report revealed the so-called Downing Street memo, the minutes of a high-powered confidential meeting that British Prime Minister Tony Blair held with his top advisers on Bush’s forthcoming plans to attack Iraq. At the secret session Richard Dearlove, former head of British intelligence, told Blair that Bush “wanted to remove Saddam Hussein through military action, justified by the conjunction of terrorism and WMD. But the intelligence and facts were being fixed around the policy.”

The Downing Street memo was a bombshell when discussed by the bloggers, but the mainstream print media ignored it until it became too embarrassing to suppress any longer. The *Post* discounted the memo as old news and pointed to reports it had many months before on the buildup to the war. *Los Angeles Times* editorial page editor Michael Kinsley decided that the classified minutes of the Blair meeting were not a “smoking gun.” The *New York Times* touched on the memo in a dispatch during the last days leading up to the British elections, but put it in the tenth paragraph.

All this took me back to the days immediately following the unraveling of the Watergate scandal. The White House press corps realized it had fallen asleep at the switch—not that all the investigative reporting could have been done by those on the so-called “body watch,” which travels everywhere with the President and has no time to dig for facts. But looking back, they knew they had missed many clues on the Watergate scandal and were determined to become much more skeptical of what was being dished out to them at the daily briefings. And, indeed, they were. The White House press room became a lion’s den.

By contrast, after the White House lost its credibility in rationalizing the pre-emptive assault on Iraq, the correspondents began to come out of their coma, yet they were still too timid to challenge Administration officials, who were trying to put a good face on a bad situation.

I recall one exchange of mine with press secretary Scott McClellan last May that illustrates the difference, and what I mean by the skeptical reporting during Watergate.

Helen: The other day, in fact this week, you [McClellan] said that we, the United States, are in Afghanistan and Iraq by invitation. Would you like to correct that incredible distortion of American history?

Scott: No. We are...that’s where we are currently.

Helen: In view of your credibility, which is already mired... how can you say that?

Scott: Helen, I think everyone in this room knows that you’re taking that comment out of context. There are two democratically elected governments in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Helen: Were we invited into Iraq?

Scott: There are democratically elected governments now in Iraq and Afghanistan, and we are there at their invitation. They are sovereign governments, but we are there today.

Helen: You mean, if they asked us out, that we would have left?

Scott: No, Helen, I’m talking about today. We are there at their invitation. They are sovereign governments.

Helen: I’m talking about today, too.

Scott: We are doing all we can to train and equip their security forces so that they can provide their own security as they move forward on a free and democratic future.

Helen: Did we invade those countries?

At that point McClellan called on another reporter.

Those were the days when I longed for ABC-TV’s great Sam Donaldson to back up my questions as he always did, and I did the same for him and other daring reporters. Then I realized that the old pros, reporters whom I had known in the past, many of them around during World War II and later the Vietnam War, reporters who had some historical perspective on government deception and folly, were not around anymore.

I honestly believe that if reporters had put the spotlight on the flaws in the Bush Administration’s war policies, they could have saved the country the heartache and the losses of American and Iraqi lives.

It is past time for reporters to forget the party line, ask the tough questions and let the chips fall where they may. ■

The Democrats: Still Ducking

ARI BERMAN

Iraq returned as a central theme in George W. Bush's State of the Union address this year. With the war on the minds of many members of the public and with the 2006 midterm elections approaching, it seemed natural that the opposition party would forcefully challenge the President's policy. Instead, the Democrats ducked and covered. Virginia Governor Tim Kaine devoted a mere three sentences to the Iraq War in his official Democratic response to Bush. Representative Rahm Emanuel, a leading party strategist, didn't even mention Iraq when asked on television what his party would do differently from the Republicans—a hint of how the Democrats have downplayed the issue internally.

On the advice of top party consultants, the Democrats in the run-up to the 2006 midterm vote are either ignoring Iraq and shifting to domestic issues (the strategy in the 2002 midterm elections) or supporting the war while criticizing Bush's handling of it (the strategy in the 2004 presidential election). Three years into the conflict most Democrats can finally offer a cogent critique of how the Bush Administration misled the American people and mismanaged the Iraqi occupation, but they're unwilling or unable to suggest clearly how the United States should extricate itself from that mess.

To be sure, some highly visible leaders of the party, including Democratic National Committee chair Howard Dean and House minority leader Nancy Pelosi, have publicly advocated an end to the war. "We do need to make it clear to the American people that after this savaging we've taken at the hands of [Karl] Rove, we are going to stand up for the country and that we have a better plan," Dean told *The Nation*. "We're not going to make a permanent commitment to a failed strategy, which is what Bush has actually done." But even Dean and Pelosi have done little within party channels to push for a change in position among their prowar colleagues. For now, many prominent Democrats continue to follow the advice of the party's risk-averse consultants and foreign policy intelligentsia—a cautious tack that is unlikely to satisfy voters' desire for change on the crucial issue of the day.

For more than a year Iraq has topped the list of voter concerns in poll after poll. Asked what should be the highest priority for America this year, the largest number of respondents in the latest NBC/*Wall Street Journal* poll chose bringing most of the troops home. Sixty-six percent of the public want the United States to "reduce its number of troops," with those respondents favoring a timeline for withdrawal by a margin of 2 to 1. Some 72 percent of American troops serving in Iraq think the United States should exit the country in the next year, a recent Zogby poll found. "The



KAREN CALDICOTT

elites in Washington are thinking a hell of a lot different than the people right now," says Joe Trippi, Dean's former campaign manager. "And someone's really wrong."

Democratic officials' decision to listen to the political elites is proving costly. This past September a Pew Research poll found that while only 30 percent of voters thought Bush had a "clear plan" on Iraq, a mere 18 percent believed that Democrats in Congress promised a "clear alternative." For a moment on November 17, when Representative Jack Murtha boldly called on Bush to bring the troops home, the Democrats seemed to have found such a voice—and with it an opportunity to shift the debate to *how* to exit Iraq, not whether to stay. Sure, plans to redeploy US troops within a year or two, sponsored by Russ Feingold in the Senate, the Out of Iraq Caucus in the House and the Center for American Progress (CAP), were already on the table. But none brought with it the standing and sense of urgency of Murtha, who previously had been known on Capitol Hill as the dean of the defense hawks.

Yet with the exception of Pelosi, who endorsed his plan, Murtha was kept at arm's length by the rest of the Democratic leadership. "Jack Murtha speaks for Jack Murtha," Emanuel, chair of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, which recruits and supports prospective House candidates, said on the day of Murtha's announcement. "As for Iraq policy, at the right time, we'll have a position."

Steny Hoyer, number-two House Democrat and unabashed war supporter, said that "a precipitous withdrawal" could lead to "disaster." A *Washington Post* survey of eight prominent foreign policy advisers found that only one, former Carter Administration National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski, proposed a clear plan for how to get out. The resulting headlines—DEMOCRATIC LAWMAKERS SPLINTER ON IRAQ, DEMOCRATS FIND IRAQ ALTERNATIVE IS ELUSIVE, DEMOCRATS FEAR BACKLASH AT POLLS FOR ANTIWAR REMARKS—reflected the disarray. As prominent Democrats shied away from the fight, Bush went on the offensive with a series of Iraq speeches, allowing Republicans to caricature Murtha's plan as "cut and run." Pollster Mark Penn and Democratic Leadership Council founder Al From warned that foes of the war "could be playing with political dynamite" and needed to be "extremely careful." These Democrats seemed transfixed by the ghost of George McGovern, instead of reacting to the mounting unease with Bush's policies. "Democrats are so obsessed with not looking 'weak' on defense that they end up making themselves look weak, period, by the way they respond to Republican attacks on their alleged weakness," *Washington Post* columnist E.J. Dionne noted in mid-December.

Democrats in Congress subsequently went mute on the war. By mid-February even Pelosi was reassuring nervous party

Ari Berman, a Nation contributing writer based in Washington, DC, is a Nation Institute Puffin Foundation writing fellow.

strategists that there would be no specific talk of Iraq when the Democrats unveiled their own version of the GOP's Contract With America later this year. The bulk of Democratic strategists approved of the no-details-on-Iraq approach.

"You can't hope the Democrats will ever have a unified message, other than a unified critique of how Bush mishandled the war," says Steve Elmendorf, a former chief of staff to Representative Dick Gephardt and senior adviser to the Kerry campaign who's helping plan the Democratic agenda for '06. "The point of an agenda is to be unified, and the party clearly won't be." Nor is it realistic to expect they should be, says longtime political adviser Paul Begala: "I don't think a Congressional candidate ought to presume to be able to solve unsolvable problems." As an example Begala praises Bob Casey Jr., a conservative Democrat from Pennsylvania who's criticized his opponent, Senator Rick Santorum, for his allegiance to President Bush but has also indicated that he would have voted for the Iraq War

and has ruled out any plan for troop withdrawals. Karl Struble, a media consultant to Kaine and former Senator Tom Daschle who'll produce campaign spots for Democratic Senate candidates in Arizona, Nebraska, Washington and West Virginia, says that Iraq "can't or shouldn't be the primary thing Democrats talk about" in '06 campaigns. "When the tree's gonna fall, the best thing to do is stay out of the way," he says.

The Democrats' prospective nominees for the presidency, who often dictate the public image of the party even during midterm elections, have largely heeded Struble's advice. "I do not believe that we should allow this to be an open-ended commitment without limits or end," Senator Hillary Clinton, the most recognizable Democrat, wrote in a letter to her constituents in late November. "Nor do I believe that we can or should pull out of Iraq immediately." If the Iraqi elections were successful, Clinton said, troops could begin coming home this year, though she didn't specify when or how. When asked if the outcome of the December elections met Clinton's criteria, her spokesperson Philippe Reines answered, "The jury's still out." Clinton continues to speak about Iraq only when she has to, in the most measured tones. Contenders such as Joe Biden, Evan Bayh and Wesley Clark have charted a similarly fuzzy approach.

"The tone, unfortunately for the Democratic majority, has been set by the two Clintons," says Brzezinski, a longstanding hawk and vocal critic of the Iraq War, "who have decided that Senator Clinton's chances would be improved if she can manage to appear as a kind of quasi-Margaret Thatcher, and therefore she's been loath to come out with a decisive, strong, unambiguous criticism of the war, with some straightforward recommendations as to what ought to be done. And I'm afraid that has contaminated the attitude of the other Democratic political leaders."

It may be impossible to assume that discussion of the war can wait until after November, given the recent events on the ground. If most Democratic strategists have continued to counsel caution on Iraq, a few do not—for moral and pragmatic

reasons. "I think the Democrats are afraid of the issue, but I don't think they should be," says Democratic pollster Celinda Lake. Lake had previously fallen into the camp of consultants who advised Democrats to ignore the war and pivot to domestic issues. Now she says that approach is no longer possible, and that Democrats must talk about a plan to bring troops home. "Iraq is the essential factor in the voters' landscape," Lake says, the number-one issue feeding distrust of the President and a desire for change.

And contrary to conventional wisdom, the public is much closer to Murtha than most strategists realize, adds public opinion expert Ruy Teixeira. "There is a big bloc of centrist voters dissatisfied with the President who don't believe in Iraq, detest it and want to get out," Teixeira says. Independent voters in particular favor a timeline for withdrawal by 54 to 36 percent in a January CBS News poll. "There's an awful lot of people in the party who think Jack Murtha

I think the Democrats are afraid of the [war] issue, but I don't think they should be.'

—Pollster Celinda Lake

was right," Dean says. "They may not be saying so, but we know that they agree."

A growing number of Democratic politicians, like their strategists, are slowly beginning to realize that Democrats cannot focus on national security without highlighting Iraq. Murtha has nearly 100 co-sponsors in the House. Prominent Democrats, including Dean, former Senate majority leader Tom Daschle and Senator Dianne Feinstein, have endorsed a moderate version of Murtha's plan, sponsored by CAP, that would redeploy all US troops by the end of 2007.

Dean personally believes that Democrats can, and may, coalesce around the CAP plan. "My argument is that we need to be specific, because we need to show strength and brainpower on defense," Dean says. "I think having a clear plan to redeploy our troops, which would result in a much smaller footprint in Iraq, makes sense." Democrats can win back the House, Dean says, only with a "broad, clearly differentiated strategy" from the Republicans, including on Iraq. Democratic candidates ranging from Montana to Ohio to Rhode Island have bucked the permanent Washington establishment and made ending the war a crucial part of their campaigns.

"Prolonging the war is damaging us in every respect," says Brzezinski. "The costs are quite extensive and if you add the economic costs [\$1 trillion] and the costs in blood [roughly 20,000 US casualties], staying the course is not a very attractive solution or definition of victory. And I think Democrats could make that case intelligently and forcefully."

With eight months to go until the 2006 elections, there's certainly time for Democrats to push for a course correction on the war. Fiddling while Iraq burns will likely only reinforce Republican stereotypes of Democrats as calculating, gutless and unable to develop a strong and sensible foreign policy that will protect Americans in a post-9/11 world. If Democrats once again fall into what Lake calls an "absence of articulation," the midterm voting—despite all the Republican scandals—could bring a replay of other years, proof of a party that has become so afraid of losing it has forgotten what it takes to win. ■

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War Is Personal: Tomas Young/Age

Their house, a suburban ranch with a wheelchair ramp running up to the front door, was, as far as I could see, the only one on the street flying an American flag. It had to be Brie, not her rebellious and haunted husband of seven months, who was responsible for this. It had been Brie who put Tomas's Purple Heart on display in a corner of their living room.

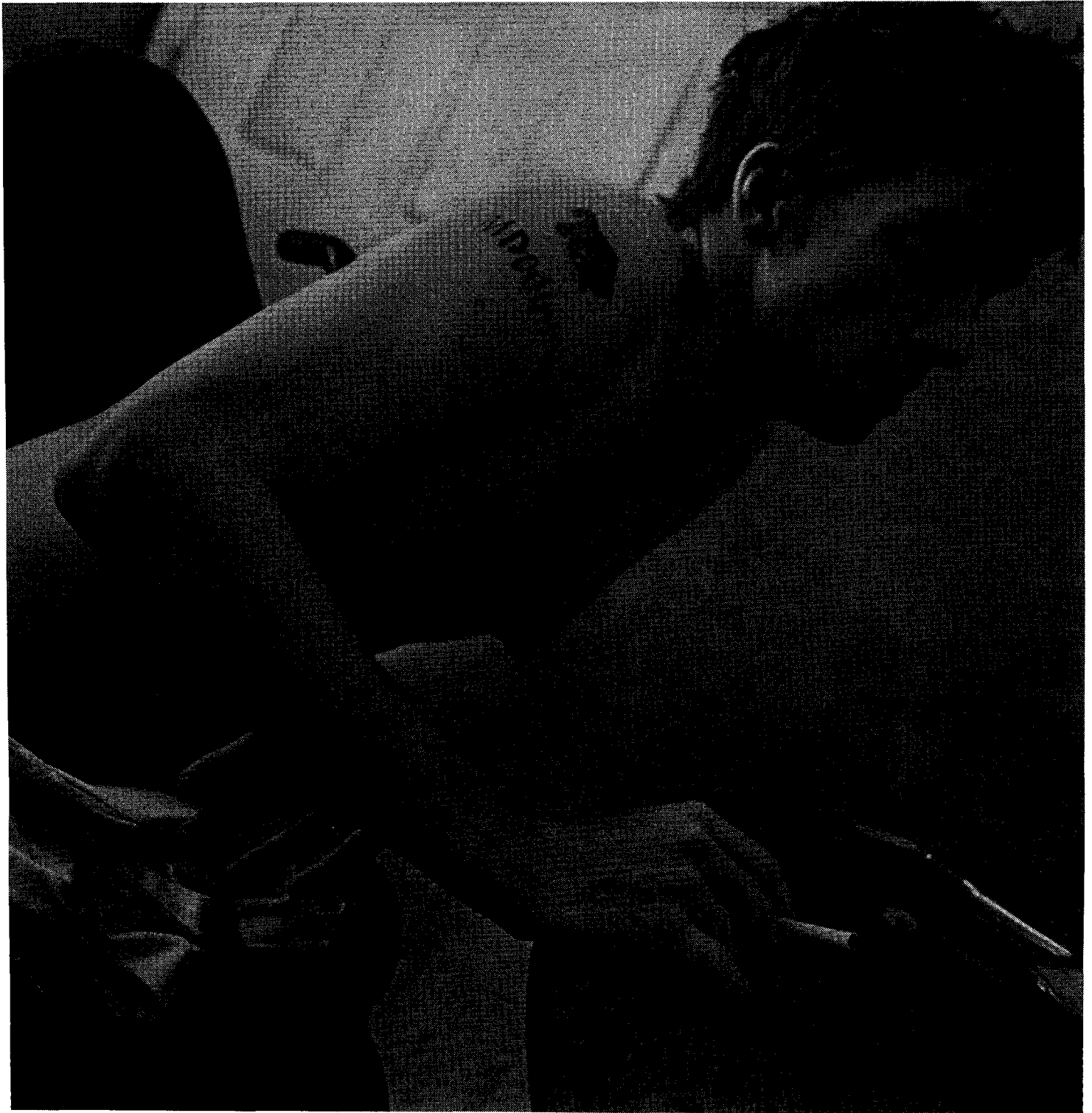
After one ring Brie let me in, then said something about being tired after waitressing the night before and padded back toward the bedroom, leaving us alone. Tomas was sitting slumped over at the dining room table, eyes half closed, smoking a cigarette amid what he had dismissed as "my clutter"—newspapers, protest buttons, pamphlets from a veterans' support group that he planned to hand out, cigarette lighters, cigarette wrappers, bills to be paid.

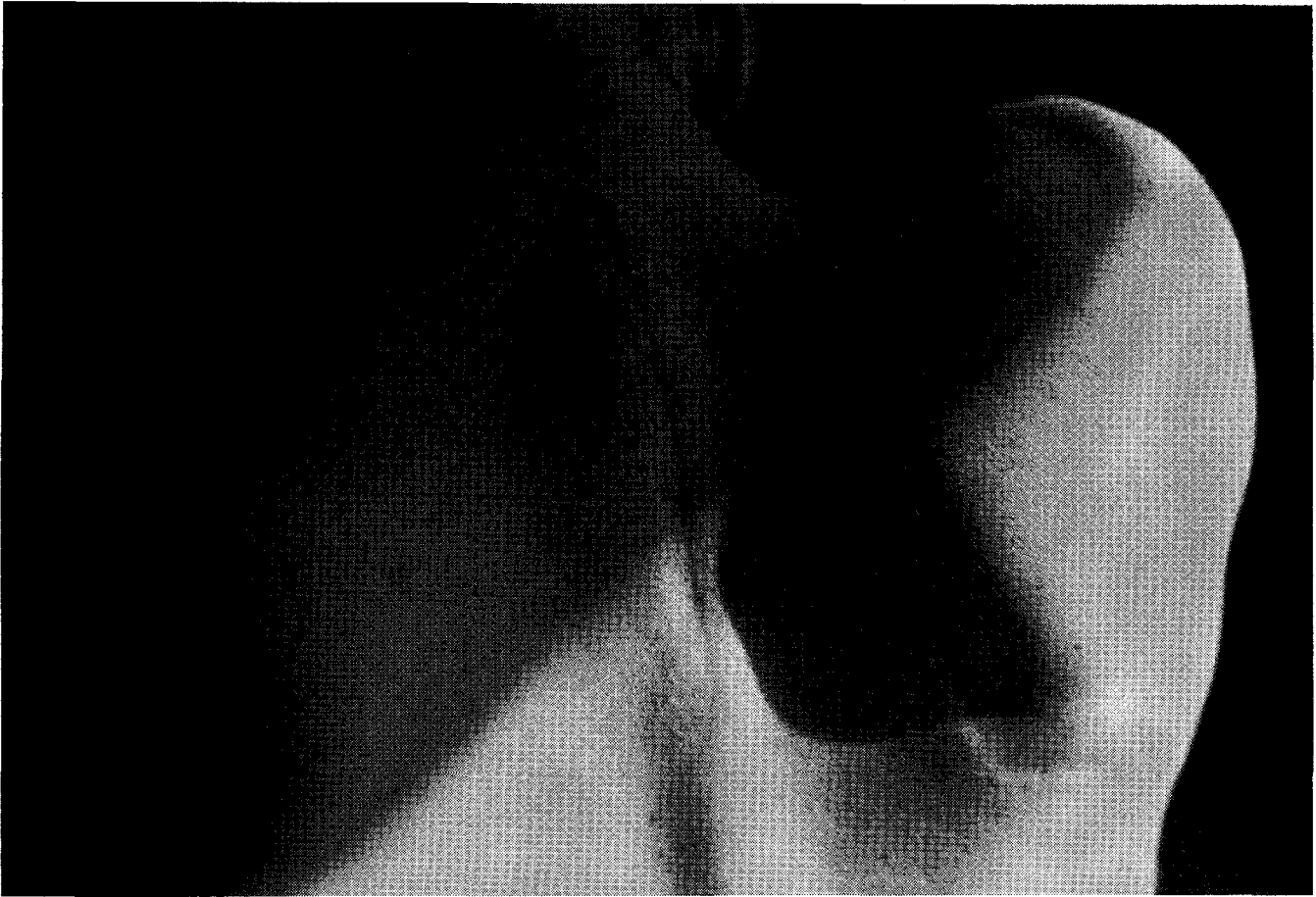
Struggling to sit upright, Tomas began forcing his thin, angular body as far forward and backward as he could. "Here I am wanting a conversation," he said, "and it's not working for me. I'm feeling kind of dizzy and thinking it must be the meds." Tomas recalled that the night before he'd taken a prescribed dose of Valium, along with his regimen of pain pills, antianxiety pills, antispasmodic pills and laxatives, only to awaken earlier than usual. At that time he took his morning dosages of morphine and Wellbutrin, and a half-dozen other drugs, before falling back to sleep. When Brie woke to remind him to take his morning pills, he forgot, in the confusion from a troubled sleep, that he already had. He'd "doubled up." Then again, maybe he hadn't.

He struggled to explain that ever since his return from Iraq, it's been a kind of magic act for him to stay upright when the only parts of his body that will obey him are his shoulders and his arms. Plus, there are the days when his body is totally uncooperative, the days when he starts "bawling for no real reason."

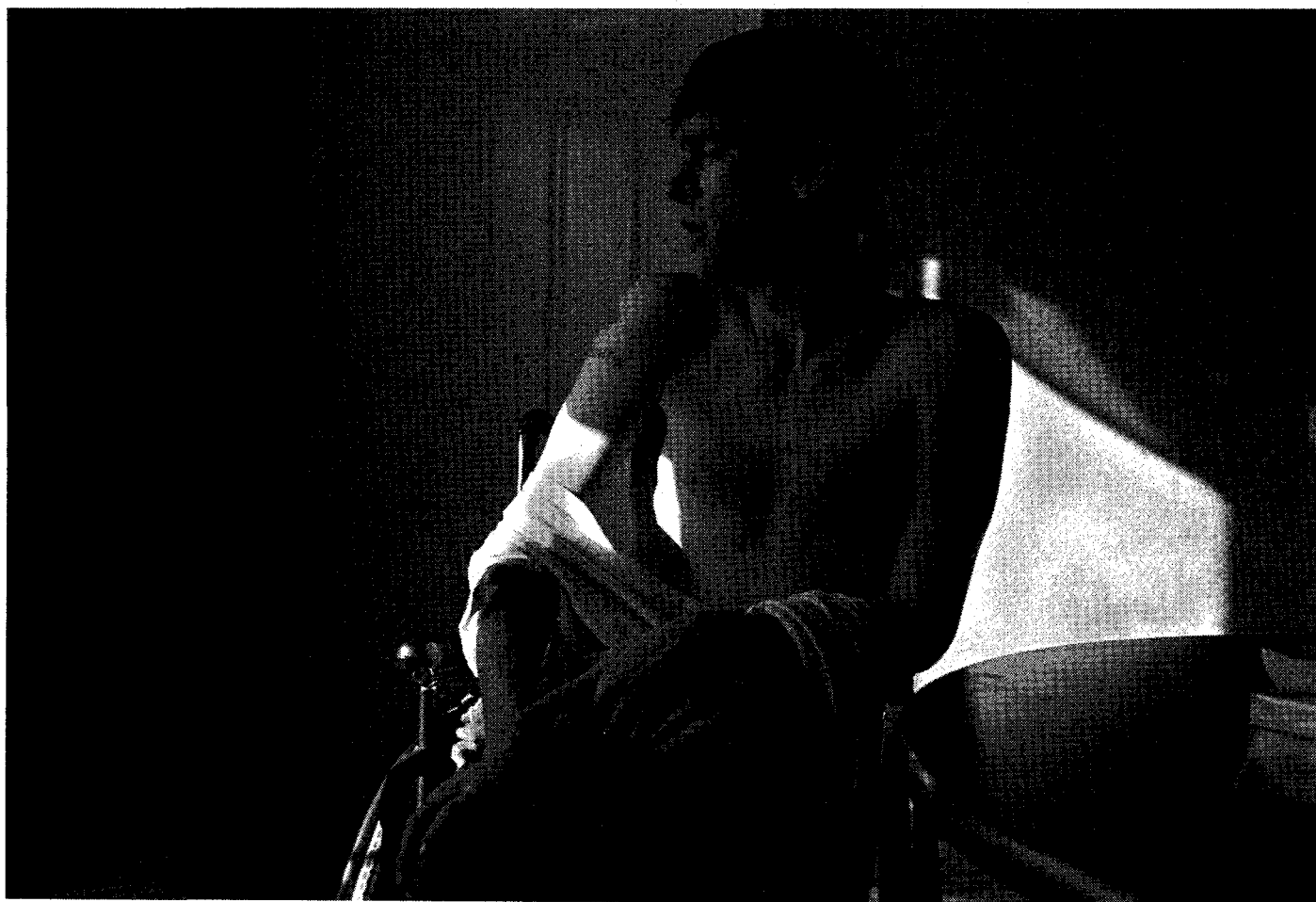


26/Kansas City, Missouri





Tomas attempted to light another cigarette, since the last one had fallen on the floor, the one before that into his lap. His hand shook, he burned his thumb, but he wouldn't be deterred. "It's the nicotine, I guess. I need it to keep going, but I know I've got to quit. I'll be smoking in bed, even with Brie beside me, have a hand spasm and the cigarette will end up rolling under my back or legs, and, though I can't feel the burns, they can become pressure sores, can make you very ill..." Here his voice trailed off. Increasingly irritated with himself, with the room already adrift in smoke, he finally managed to light up a cigarette, dropped it and began searching for it, plucking at his clothing like he had this itch, this terrible, unreachable pain.



Just then, as the two of us grew silent, Brie walked in. "What are you doing with your shirt off?" she asked him. Tomas had pulled it off, knowing that I needed to take pictures. He had yanked it up. In three tries he had it over his head. I could see the tiny entry wound the bullet had left in front just beneath his collarbone, the much larger exit wound in back below his shoulder blade, the wide, pale, zipperlike scar along his spine.

It was on April 4, 2004, his fourth day in Iraq, that his Army unit was ambushed. The place was the insurgent stronghold of Sadr City. The truck he was riding in, Tomas recalled ruefully, was unarmored and so crammed full of soldiers—twenty-five men in a space meant for eighteen—that he couldn't even point his weapon outside. Bullets began flying everywhere, splintering metal, striking almost everyone, when all of a sudden his whole body went numb and he saw himself dropping his M-16 and being unable to pick it up. There was no pain. It took only a few seconds more for him to realize that the thing that had just happened to him was something he would have to deal with for the rest of his life. He tried screaming for someone to kill him, but all that came out was this tiny whisper.

Can You Say 'Permanent Bases'?

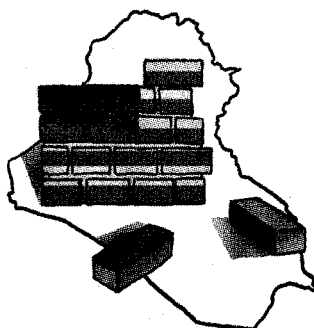
TOM ENGELHARDT

In a recent Zogby poll, American troops stationed in Iraq were asked about an otherwise unexplored subject: the massive network of bases the Bush Administration is building in that country. Only 6 percent said they believed that America's "real mission" in Iraq was "to provide long-term bases for US troops in the region." You can bet your bottom dollar that if Zogby had been able to do an honest poll of top Bush Administration officials on the subject, he'd have gotten quite a different response.

It makes no sense to talk about withdrawal from Iraq, which has recently been the object of much speculation (in the same Zogby poll, 72 percent of the troops in Iraq said they want the United States to exit that country within a year), without also talking about those bases. Yet they have hardly been mentioned in our media or in political discussion. We have no idea, in fact, how many Americans even realize that we *have* such bases.

Sometimes to get one's bearing it helps to focus on the concrete. In an online engineering magazine in late 2003, Lieut. Col. David Holt, the Army officer described as "tasked with facilities development" in Iraq, was already speaking of several billion dollars being sunk into base construction, which has been continuing ever since. In a country otherwise in startling disarray, our bases are like vast spaceships from another solar system. A staggering investment of resources, they are unlikely places for the Bush Administration to hand over willingly even to the friendliest Iraqi government.

If Bush-style reconstruction, having failed dismally, is now essentially ending in most of Iraq, it has been a raging success in Iraq's "Little America." For the first time, we have descriptions of a couple of our "super-bases" there, and they are sobering. The *Washington Post's* Thomas Ricks paid a visit to Balad Air Base, forty-two miles north of Baghdad and "smack in the middle of the most hostile part of Iraq." The largest base in the country, Ricks tells us, has an American "small-town feel" and is sizable enough to have "neighborhoods," including "KBR-land" (in honor of the Halliburton subsidiary that has done most base-construction work) and the walled-in "CJSOTF" (the Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force, so secretive that even the base Army public affairs chief hasn't been inside). There is as well a Subway, a Pizza Hut, a Popeye's, "an ersatz Starbucks," a twenty-four-hour Burger King, two post exchanges where TVs, iPods and the like, convoyed in, can be purchased, four mess halls, a hospital, a speed limit of ten miles per hour, a huge airstrip, 250 aircraft, air-traffic pileups of a sort familiar over Chicago's O'Hare airport and a "miniature golf course, which mimics a battlefield with its baby sandbags, little Jersey barriers, strands of concertina wire and,



KAREN CALDICOTT

down at the end of the course, what appears to be a tiny detainee cage." Ricks reports that, of the 20,000 troops living in "air-conditioned containers" (soon to be wired for Internet, cable television and overseas telephone access), "only several hundred have jobs that take them off base." Recently, British reporter Oliver Poole visited the still-under-construction al-Asad Air Base in a stretch of desert in Anbar Province that "increasingly resembles a slice of US suburbia."

In addition to the requisite Subway and pizza outlets, this super-base even has a Hertz rent-a-car office. In fact, al-Asad is so large—such bases may cover fifteen to twenty square miles—that it has two bus routes.

There are at least four such "super-bases" in Iraq, little American islands of eternal order in an anarchic sea. Whatever top officials and military commanders say—and they always deny seeking "permanent bases"—facts on the ground speak with another voice.

Unfortunately, there's a problem in grasping the import of any of this, since American reporters apparently adhere to a simple rule: The words "permanent," "bases" and "Iraq" should never be placed in the same news report. A LexisNexis search of three months of press coverage produced examples of those three words in British reports, but US examples occurred only when 80 percent of polled Iraqis (obviously unhinged by their difficult lives) agreed that the United States might want to remain permanently in their country, or when "no" or "not" was added to the mix via any official American denial—as when Brig. Gen. Mark Kimmitt said recently: "It is not only our plan but our policy that we do not intend to have any permanent bases in Iraq." (In other words, in the media such bases, imposing as they are, generally exist only in the negative.)

Still, for a period the Pentagon practiced something closer to truth in advertising. They called their big bases "enduring bases," a label that reeked of permanence. (Later, these were far less romantically relabeled "contingency operating bases.")

One mystery of this war—given an Administration so weighted toward military solutions to global problems; given the heft of the bases themselves; given the mothballing of our Saudi bases, for which these were clearly long-term substitutes; given the focus of the neocons and other top officials on controlling what they called "the arc of instability" (basically, the energy heartlands of the planet) at whose epicenter was Iraq; and given that Pentagon pre-war planning for "enduring camps" was, briefly, a front-page story in a major newspaper—is that reporting on the subject has been next to nonexistent. While much space has been devoted to the Administration's lack of postwar planning, next to none has been devoted to what planning did take place.

A little history may be in order here: Soon after Baghdad fell, Thom Shanker and Eric Schmitt reported on the front page of the *New York Times* that the Pentagon was planning to "main-

Tom Engelhardt, who runs *The Nation Institute's* *Tomdispatch.com*, where a longer version of this piece first appeared, is the author of *The End of Victory Culture, a history of American triumphalism in the cold war*.

tain" four bases in Iraq for the long haul, though "there will probably never be an announcement of permanent stationing of troops." Rather than "permanent bases," the military preferred to speak coyly of "permanent access" to Iraq. The bases, however, fit snugly with other Pentagon plans. For instance, Saddam's 400,000-man military was to be replaced by a 40,000-man one without significant armor or an air force. (In an otherwise heavily armed region, this insured that any Iraqi government would be reliant on our military for years to come.)

At a press conference a few days later, Donald Rumsfeld insisted that the United States was unlikely to seek any permanent or "long-term" bases in Iraq—and the *Times* piece was consigned to the memory hole. While scads of bases were being built—including four huge ones whose placement correlated fairly strikingly with those mentioned in the *Times* article—reports about US bases in Iraq, or any Pentagon planning in relation to them, largely disappeared.

In May 2005 Bradley Graham of the *Washington Post* finally reported that we had 106 bases, ranging from micro to mega, in Iraq. Most of these were to be ceded to the Iraqi military, leaving the United States with, Graham reported, just the number of bases—four—that the *Times* had first mentioned more than two years earlier, including the bases Ricks and Poole visited. This reduction was presented not as a fulfillment of original Pentagon thinking but as a withdrawal plan.

The future of a fifth base—the enormous Camp Victory at Baghdad International Airport—remains, as far as we know, unresolved; but at least one more super-base is being built. The Administration is sinking at least \$592 million into a new US Embassy to rise in Baghdad's Green Zone on land reportedly two-thirds the size of the National Mall. A high-tech complex with "15 ft blast walls and ground-to-air missiles" for protection, it will, according to Chris Hughes of the British *Daily Mirror*, include as many as "300 houses for consular and military officials" and a "large-scale barracks" for marines. According to David Phinney of CorpWatch.org, the complex's "water, electricity and sewage treatment plants will all be independent from Baghdad's city utilities." It's billed as "more secure than the Pentagon" (not, perhaps, the most reassuring tag line in the post-9/11 world). If not quite a city-state, it will resemble an embassy-state.

As Middle East expert Juan Cole has pointed out at his Informed Comment blog, the Pentagon can plan for "endurance" in Iraq forever and a day. Nothing, however, makes such bases more "permanent" than their Vietnam-era predecessors at places like Danang and Cam Ranh Bay, if the Shiites, like the Sunnis, decide they want us gone.

To this day, those Little Americas remain at the secret heart of "reconstruction" policy in Iraq. As long as KBR keeps building them, there can be no genuine withdrawal. Despite recent press visits, our super-bases remain swathed in policy silence. The Bush Administration does not discuss them (other than to deny their permanence). No plans for them are debated in Congress. The opposition Democrats generally ignore them.

It may be hard to do, given the skimpy coverage, but keep your eyes directed at those super-bases. Until the Administration blinks with regard to them, there will be no withdrawal from Iraq. ■

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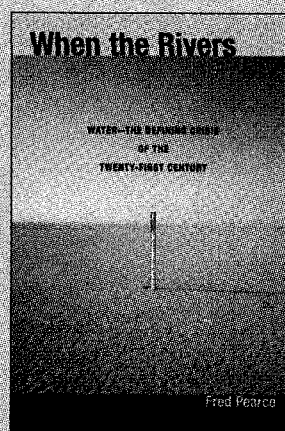
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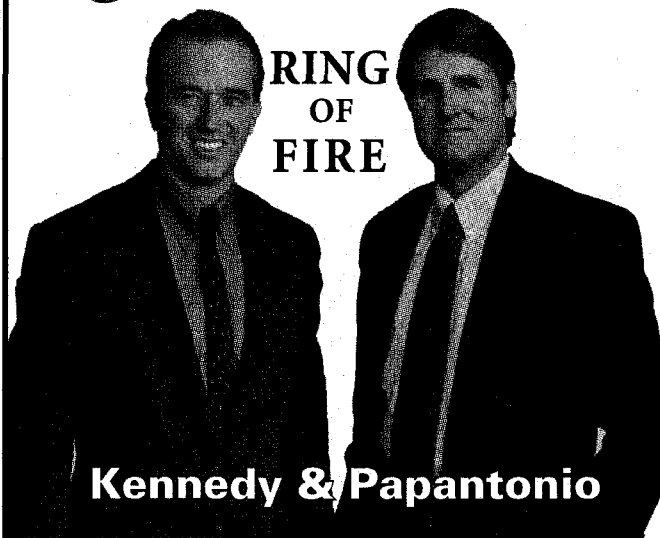
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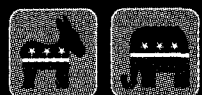
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LETTERS

C O N T I N U E D

(Continued From Page 2)

islands. Just ask the people of Rongelap, who were exposed to US nuclear tests in the Marshalls. As a State Department lawyer, Hills led the move to dismiss their cases in the US Court of Claims. Then he offered the people of Rongelap his services as a "connected Republican lobbyist and political strategist" to restore their claims and get Congressional funding. Oh, but for a fee of more than \$300,000 a year. This is not representation, this is a shakedown, like closing casinos and then offering help to reopen them—for a fee. Varmints like Hills should be exposed and brought to justice.

TONY DE BRUM

NUKING THE NUKES

La Jolla, Calif.

■ Richard Falk's "Storm Clouds Over Iran" [Feb. 13], on the dangers associated with a US aerial attack on Iran, omits the crucial fact that such an attack is likely to include the use of tactical nuclear weapons. New US nuclear weapons policies have "integrated" nuclear weapons with conventional weapons and envision their use against underground facilities and to pre-empt enemy attack with WMD. The drafters of these policies occupy the upper echelons of the current Administration.

The B61-11 nuclear earth penetrator entered the US stockpile in late 2001. It can be launched from F-16 aircraft and causes twenty to 200 times less "collateral damage" than surface explosion. At low yield in desolated areas like the Natanz enrichment plant, it would cause few casualties and achieve US goals. The US "negative security assurance" of 1995 promising not to use nuclear weapons against nonnuclear countries explicitly excludes countries declared in "noncompliance" with the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, as Iran was in September 2005. Pentagon documents emphasize that "no customary or conventional international law prohibits nations from employing nuclear weapons in armed conflict."

The President has sole authority to order the use of nuclear weapons. Under Article I, Section 8, Clause 14 of the Constitution, Congress could restrict this authority by legislating that its authorization is needed for the use of nuclear weapons against nonnuclear countries. Such use of nuclear weapons will set off a dangerous chain reaction, leading to many more countries acquiring nuclear weapons and heightening the risk of global nuclear war. This path should not be entered on the decision of the President alone. Congress is derelict in its responsibilities if it doesn't address this issue while there is still time.

JORGE HIRSCH

DINING AT THE CIA'S 3-STAR TROUGH

Louisville, Ky.

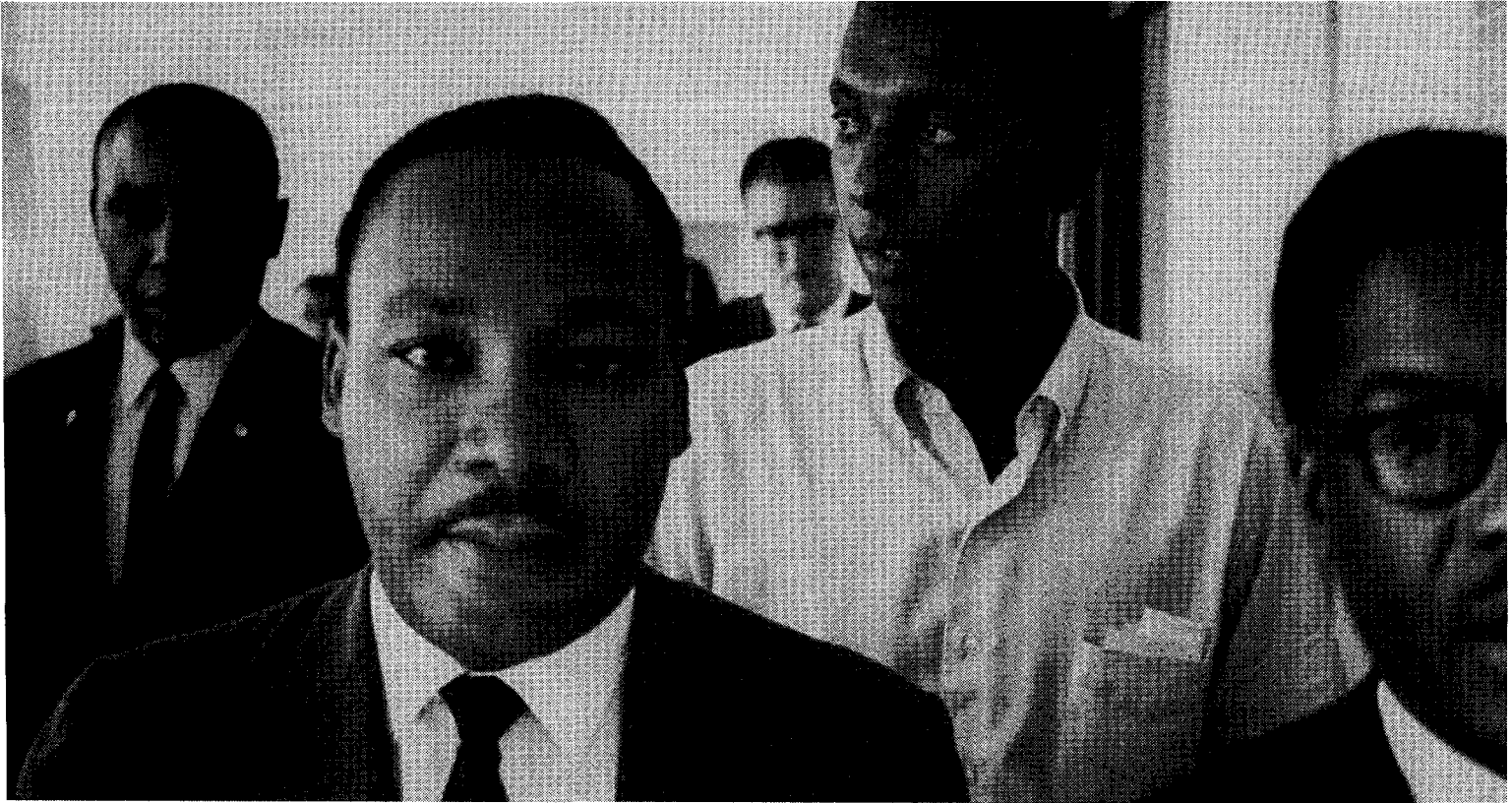
■ Victor Navasky's obituary for *The New Leader* ["In Fact...," Feb. 13] contained an interesting comment: "Arguably it has been drifting rightward...even dined at the CIA trough," which stirred me to defend progressive groups that received CIA funds during the cold war. Accepting occasional support from the CIA in the 1950s might very well have been a mark of honor and distinction for a leftist journal like *The New Leader*.

The CIA was created in 1947 by Congress to fight the cold war using covert and clandestine methods. Despite its many failures, the agency was always on "our side." We may have had "rogue" Presidents who used the CIA for rogue purposes, but we never had a rogue CIA. In fact, *The New Leader's* founder, the Socialist Party's Norman Thomas, was involved with a group that supported elected Latin American leftist governments, like the one that briefly ruled in the Dominican Republic, 1962–63. This group was later revealed to have received funds from CIA cash conduits. That fact does not imply that Thomas had moved "rightward," only that the US government—in this case, that of John Kennedy—wanted a means of quickly and quietly helping the reformist government of Juan Bosch without having to go through Congress.

As a young graduate student, I was involved with the programs of this group—which ran IDES (the Institute for Economic and Social Development) in the Dominican Republic, and CIA funding was vital. (Unfortunately, the Bosch administration was overthrown by a coup in mid-1963). The CIA, with all its warts, was always on our side in the cold war. I'm not certain I could say the same for *The Nation*.

DAVID EUGENE BLANK

BOOKS & THE ARTS



TIME LIFE PICTURES/GETTY IMAGES

The Great Black Hope

GERALD EARLY

AT CANAAN'S EDGE:
America in the King Years, 1965–1968.
 By Taylor Branch.
 Simon & Schuster. 1,039 pp. \$35.

The June 1967 issue of William Gaines's popular humor magazine *Mad* was devoted to race, with images of Alfred E. Neuman on the cover in several different racial guises. The "Special Racial Issue," as it was called, featured two comic-strip satires of the kind for which the magazine was famous. One was a sendup of the television series *I Spy*, whose co-star, Bill Cosby, was the first African-American actor to have a regular leading role in a television drama. The other comic strip, "Stokely and Tess," cleverly drawn from the Gershwin/DuBose opera *Porgy and Bess*, explored the

internal division in the civil rights movement between advocates of nonviolent resistance in the Martin Luther King Jr. mold and the emerging Black Power movement.

Stokely was, of course, Black Power activist Stokely Carmichael, former chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and a longstanding voter-registration organizer in Lowndes County, Alabama. Carmichael had marched side by side with King as recently as 1966, but by the following year he had become, for whites, the nightmare symbol of radical, unruly blacks. In the satire *Tess*, a fictional character, represents the uncommitted or unsure black person, whom Stokely tries to woo with the rhetoric of Black Power and self-determination, while King competes for her loyalty with the blandishments of nonviolence and Christian love. There were cameos by Sammy Davis Jr., Harlem preacher and Congressman Adam Clayton Powell, comedian Dick Gregory, James Baldwin, Malcolm X and Muhammad Ali, all celebrities associated with distinct factions of the civil rights movement or ideologies critical of it. *Tess* herself is a caricature of Diahann Carroll, the most famous

Gerald Early, the Merle Kling Professor of Modern Letters at Washington University in St. Louis, is the author of several books, including The Culture of Bruising: Essays on Prizefighting, Literature and Modern American Culture, which won the 1994 National Book Critics Circle Award for Criticism.

black actress of the time, who had a major role in Otto Preminger's 1959 film version of *Porgy and Bess* (Bess was played by Dorothy Dandridge). In fact, what drove the entire satire was precisely the interconnection between the civil rights movement and popular culture. *Mad* writers and artists could expect their white adolescent readers to know who these black people were and to have some familiarity with what they were arguing about. It was probably the first time in American history when the political divisions among blacks mattered to whites, thanks in large part to the 1965 race rebellion in Watts and subsequently in other parts of the country, especially the North. Before this, the civil rights struggle, and the race conflict generally, was seen as a Southern problem. By the mid-1960s it had become a national crisis. As a result, the conflicts between black "militants" and "moderates," to use the lingo of the era, had even become a form of popular entertainment.

"Stokely and Tess" also marked the end of an era, in the sense that the assassination of King the following April made it virtually impossible for anyone to treat the movement or King with such gleeful irreverence. Since then, liberal white guilt and black pride have transformed him into a civic and racial saint, so transcendent that even conservatives, who had no love for him when he was alive, pay him homage. It is hard to say who has benefited from King's embalming, but it's not the American public, which hardly needs to have the jagged edges of its past smoothed over by the sentimentalization of a figure so central to the debate over the meaning of our democracy.

Coming from a politically active family, with two older sisters who helped to launch Temple University's Black Students Union and its first black publication, *Maji-Maji*, I read the *Mad* "Special Race Issue" at the time with some interest. I wasn't supposed to appreciate a sendup of black politics by whites, but I found it hilarious. I don't know whether the *Mad* writers were aware of how ambivalent blacks were about the opera, but it was precisely this ambivalence that made "Stokely and Tess" work as a satire. It was funny, in part, because no black person I knew liked *Porgy and Bess* but everyone knew the songs. Every black singer, professional and amateur, when I was a kid, sang "Summertime."

Taylor Branch does not mention "Stokely and Tess" in *At Canaan's Edge*, the concluding volume of his epic trilogy on America in the King years. This omission signals a certain weakness concerning how

deeply black politics affected the way black people saw their cultural life in the 1960s, as well as how black politics shaped the perception of black people in popular culture. But the internal divisions in the movement, nonviolence versus Black Power, the splintering of the fragile but effective black consensus after the 1965 Selma March, is very much one of the subjects of this sprawling and intensely elegiac book. The collapse of the African-American consensus mirrored the breakdown in the New Deal liberal consensus itself, a breakdown caused in good measure by the Vietnam War; the course of what one might call Mr. Johnson's War is also a major subject of Branch's book. The demise of New Deal liberalism—in part because it failed to produce true equity, the hope of the civil rights movement, and in part because it presided over a cynical foreign policy that led to the anti-Communist catastrophe called Vietnam—is one of the great tragedies or, for resurgent conservatives, one of the great "corrections" of twentieth-century American history.

What Branch makes clear, though, is that New Deal liberalism was undone equally by hubris and by doubt, by rash action and by compromised hesitancy. Lyndon Johnson's frantic rush to pass pathbreaking legislation while he still had the political capital to do so seems, in retrospect, to reflect not only his sense of the urgency of rendering justice but a preoccupation with his place in history and an overweening pride in fixing the country's sins. King's push for more demonstrations after 1965, at a time when even his most ardent followers felt exhausted and frustrated, mirrored the same pride and the same mad rush for change. Those who believed that change was occurring too quickly for it to be absorbed or understood or before a consensus of white working- and middle-class support could be generated for it were right.

Yet as Branch recounts, civil rights workers in the racist trenches of the Deep South felt that the government was moving too slowly, fearful of white (particularly Southern white) alienation, and that Johnson should seize the moment and complete the project of Reconstruction that had been aborted nearly 100 years earlier. To these activists King seemed, if anything, too hesitant in following the logic of his own message. Without a radical revolution in the relationship between black and white Americans, nothing in the end would really change. Those who felt that progress was coming in piecemeal fashion and that the search for a white middle-class consensus in favor of racial equality was not only unnecessary

but counterrevolutionary were right, too.

The ultimate paradox of the 1960s was that its reformist urge simultaneously went too far and not far enough, as the country was consumed by the fires of two protracted wars: the domestic race war of whites against blacks and the foreign imperialist war of Americans against Asians. Race was not incidental to people's views of Vietnam, among opponents as well as supporters. Henry Luce, founder of *Time* magazine—who considered himself something of an Asian expert, as he had been born in China—told Johnson that, in Branch's words, "racial prejudice worked against the call to military sacrifice across the Pacific." And on the left, particularly the black left, Vietnam was seen as a racist, neocolonialist war of a rich white nation against a poor "colored" nation. The idea of Third World "colored" solidarity had spread since the end of World War II with gatherings such as the Afro-Asian Unity Conference in Bandung, Indonesia, in 1955 and such movements as Egyptian President Nasser's Arab nationalism and various forms of Pan-Africanism. Race was the American Armageddon of the 1960s.

From the fires of these wars over race and poverty at home and Third World nationalism abroad came a resurgent, newly populist American conservatism that has become a vital, if not the dominant, force in American political life since the 1968 election of Republican Richard Nixon as President on a platform of "law and order" and "peace with honor." ("Peace with honor" turned out to mean five more years of escalated bloodletting in Vietnam in what became Mr. Nixon's War.) Yet it was not Nixon who breathed new life into conservatism but rather Ronald Reagan, whose rise to the governorship of California in 1966 Branch recounts. Reagan put a genial, optimistic face on conservatism and gave the dismantling of the New Deal legislative program, the aim of American conservatives since the 1930s, an almost reformist air of freshness and vitality. Still, as Branch makes clear, the Johnson legacy of 1960s liberal reform remains a cornerstone of American life: "federal aid to education, Medicare, voting rights, and immigration reform.... Each of the bills established a landmark national commitment—to the young, the elderly, minorities, and even aspiring foreigners. Together they extended America's distinctive horizontal bonds of popular strength, in keeping with the founding principle of equal citizenship."

Branch's book opens with the Selma March for voting rights in 1965, "the last great thrust of a movement built on patriotic idealism," then facing "an opposing tide of resentment and disbelief...con-

testing the language of freedom." This march, which aided the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, brought together a perfect coalition of the federal government, white religious and political liberals, and Southern blacks, both middle-class and rural poor, young and old. As Branch reminds us, the Selma campaign was actually a series of marches—the first savagely attacked by Alabama state troopers and white militias; a second march that King led up to the Pettus Bridge and then turned back so as not to violate a temporary restraining order; and a final march that went from Selma to Montgomery, a trip that only a relatively small number made in its entirety, since the court would only grant permission for a limited number of people to cross a narrow section of the bridge. There were deaths—the murder of two whites, James Reeb and Viola Liuzzo, made national headlines. But it was probably the most guarded march, by the federal government, of any civil rights demonstration.

At Canaan's Edge concludes with the assassination of King in April 1968 in Memphis, where he was trying to help a black sanitation workers' union negotiate with the tough, unsympathetic Mayor Henry Loeb. At this point, King was trying to hold on to his crumbling coalition—the federal government had abandoned him for turning against the Vietnam War; white liberals had grown weary of demonstrations and wary of the growing black separatism and truculence that now characterized the movement; and blacks themselves had grown sick of nonviolence, as it seemed to have produced nothing but white violence or episodes of black self-destructiveness. He was aching for a major demonstration that would prove the effectiveness of nonviolent resistance strategies, although, as Branch notes, he was "far from sure they would work." Thus was born King's plan for a poor people's march on Washington, which he tried to get a variety of "non-black" minority leaders to support. This multiculturalist approach was, for him, the crucial next phase of the civil rights movement. The idea of the march seemed almost quixotic, even to King's lieutenants—Ralph Abernathy, Hosea Williams, Jesse Jackson, Andrew Young and James Bevel, a remarkable collection of talented, committed men but often, with the exception of Young, prone to neurotic histrionics. Yet King staked his ego, his sense of political and religious mission, even his very sanity, on going ahead. He was waylaid by the trouble in Memphis, where he had been urged to intervene by longtime associate and nonviolent pioneer James Lawson. His advisers urged him not to become in-

involved, as it would take time and resources from the Poor People's Campaign. He didn't listen.

Between these two events we learn about Johnson's historic Congressional speech announcing voting rights legislation, where he committed the nation to equality (and, implicitly, to affirmative action). "Not only did Johnson embrace the fused spiritual and patriotic grounding of the nonviolent movement, but he committed the national government to vindicate its long-suffering promise of equal citizenship," Branch writes. "A tear rolled down King's cheek" as he listened to Johnson's speech.

Yet the alliance between the two men, never an easy one, was soon to crumble over the Vietnam War. At first King tried to finesse matters by hiding his hatred of war under the mantle of being a minister, hoping not to alienate Johnson because he understood the risks Johnson was taking in his staunch support of the civil rights movement. And Johnson was not one to tolerate dissent on the war, viewing critics of Vietnam as, in Branch's words, "disloyal, impractical, and unprincipled all at once." Yet King could not conceal his opposition to the war for long, and in his Riverside Church address in April 1967, he passionately echoed the left's view of the war as imperialist and racist. He had hinted at those views earlier, but under pressure from Bayard Rustin and other aides, he had muted them as well as he could.

In perhaps his greatest service, Branch helps us to understand why nonviolence lost its appeal to civil rights activists in the trenches, notably to Stokely Carmichael. During his courageous work with SNCC in Lowndes County, Carmichael came up against such tremendous white resistance that he and many of his fellow activists became disillusioned with democratic, representative politics. The movement he led resulted in the formation of the Black Panther Party, which in turn inspired a set of self-styled revolutionaries in Oakland, California, to take the name and make it famous, or infamous. James Meredith's one-man March Against Fear in June 1966, during which he was shot by a segregationist, also hastened SNCC's deterioration and the coming of Black Power. But if the repression and stresses of the Southern campaign and the inability to control "wildcat" actions like Meredith's led to the breakdown of the civil rights movement, the Watts riot and its successors created a new set of fault lines.

King's campaign in Chicago was a response to Watts, and Branch gives a typically comprehensive account of it. The minister's staff was divided about going

there because of the complexity of the local politics both outside and within the black community. King seemed to be almost desperate. "We have stood up for nonviolence with all our hearts," he cried at one point. "I need help. I need some victories. I need some concessions." The local white response to the demonstrations was horrific. "I have never in my life seen such hate," King said. As Branch observes: "Chicago nationalized race, complementing the impact of Watts. Without it King would be confined to posterity more as a regional figure. The violence against Northern demonstrations cracked a beguiling, cultivated conceit that bigotry was the province of backward Southerners, treatable by enlightened but firm instruction." Branch sees the Chicago campaign as less of a failure than many other commentators do, although he admits that it was not a success.

As sympathetic as President Johnson was to the aims of the civil rights movement, King faced a ferocious enemy in the federal government: the serpentine FBI director J. Edgar Hoover. There is much in Branch's book about Hoover's efforts to undermine and discredit the movement even as the FBI investigated violent crimes against civil rights workers in the South. This campaign of sabotage created an atmosphere of fear and loathing between many in the civil rights movement and the FBI. We are also given the story of the rise of the antiwar movement, from a few single individuals who set themselves on fire in protest of the brutality of the war to the surging power of a mass movement, almost exclusively populated by whites. Its relationship with the civil rights movement, which it eventually overshadowed, was always uneasy even though younger, more radical civil rights workers, like those in SNCC, were almost instantaneously antiwar.

It is a testament to Branch's skills as a writer that he is able to keep all these balls in the air in the formation of a riveting narrative that doesn't meander or get too trapped in the details, although it is extraordinarily, even relentlessly, detailed. It is clear that Branch's sympathies lie with King, the movement and the emerging participatory democracy that was being generated largely through the committed actions of a small number of citizens. But Branch is more a chronicler of events than an analytic writer, and one of the weaknesses of the book for some readers will be the lack of a theoretical framework, its failure to make the reader see the meaning of the history in fresh terms.

King emerges in this galaxy as a man who is desperately trying to hold the center, trying not to go too far to the left and get swallowed by the white peace movement or

the New Left. Unlike Bayard Rustin and W.E.B. Du Bois, King didn't run the risk here solely of being politically marginalized by pacifism but of being used by the white left, since, as a Nobel Prize winner, a man who talked with Presidents and helped get legislation passed, and as the leader of a successful mass movement, he was bringing far more to the table than the white left was. Branch notes that King thought several leaders of the white peace movement were pushy and eager to take advantage of his fame and political legitimacy. One of his advisers, Stanley Levison, remarked at one point that he could understand why Dr. Spock had "difficulty with these people."

But King fought equally hard not to be absorbed by black cultural nationalism (Amiri Baraka, Maulana Ron Karenga, Kawaida, the Nation of Islam) or Black Power or black leftist radicalism (the Black Panther Party). He hated separatism, although he understood its causes. For King, separatism was simply not a practical or even rational solution to the problems of blacks in America. Part of his dislike of black cultural nationalism might have reflected his inability to escape the bourgeois Christian conventions that had shaped his life. Part of it probably sprang from a conviction that nonviolence and Christian love were the truly revolutionary forces for positive change and that all other things were simply versions of authoritarian despair or nihilism. Black cultural nationalism, Black Power and the cries for redemptive violence were all, to King, signs of defeat and black political and cultural breakdown. King was convinced that only he offered hope, for the only way to change America was to believe in it, and the only way to expand the democratic possibility was to believe that democracy was worth sacrificing for, not that it should itself be sacrificed.

Addicted to sleeping pills, cheating habitually on his wife, downing straight whiskeys in quiet moments (which his denomination forbade), smoking cigarettes while trying to cope with the constant threat of death and consumed by self-righteousness, egotism and guilt over his affairs and his fame, King comes across as an amazingly courageous, if fatalistic, man, by turns practical and romantic, and far tougher than our plaster-saint version of him comes close to suggesting. He accepted the real possibility of an untimely death with the Christian shrug of "if it is God's will." And what else could he do? He could hardly fret about staying alive, and he was far more concerned about threats to his family. He worked astonishingly long hours,

embarking on grueling fundraising tours and adeptly dealing with the press. He tolerated a group of nearly unmanageable advisers and the grand egos of all the clerical members of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, who knew that he ultimately called the shots, and who remained loyal to him to the end. Although he was not an especially good administrator, he was deft at handling the domineering personalities around him, much as Duke Ellington handled the stars of his band. He was a star in a way that no other black leader before or since has been.

There were two elements I felt this book lacked as a "life and times" work: a brief account of the Black Arts Movement and the influence of black writers like Amiri Baraka, Don L. Lee (now Haki Madhubuti), Sonia Sanchez and others on the thinking of younger blacks and a paragraph or so on the publication and impact of John Williams's novel *The Man Who Cried I Am* (1967), the most important black novel of the 1960s. Second, a bit more, perhaps a page or so, about trends in African-American popular music—Curtis Mayfield, Motown, James Brown and others—would have been nice, and perhaps a bit on the rise of the natural or bush as a hairstyle (later to be called the

Afro). It might be argued that this is strictly a book about politics, but the Black Power movement cannot be fully understood and its impact cannot be fully appreciated unless its cultural claims and manifestations are delineated or at least acknowledged. Many black people then made virtually no distinction between their politics and their culture. William Van Deburg's *New Day in Babylon: The Black Power Movement and American Culture, 1965–1975* complements Branch's book nicely in this regard.

This final volume in Branch's staggering trilogy reminds us of what a mighty contribution the civil rights movement made to the transformation of American democracy, how, for a certain number of years, it gave black people a sense of hope, of optimism, of belief in their native land. It also reminds us of how extraordinary Martin Luther King was, a conspicuously flawed but astonishingly brilliant vessel, a man central casting would not have selected to be the centerpiece of the greatest and most well-organized mass movement for social change the United States has ever seen. It was true, for a time in America during the King years, as King so famously misquoted the Bible, that "justice rolls down like the waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream." ■

The Dream Life

GILBERTO PEREZ

THE POWER OF MOVIES: How Screen and Mind Interact.

By Colin McGinn. Pantheon. 210 pp. \$24.

Films have often been compared to dreams. Indeed, there is something dreamlike about those images moving before us as we sit still in the dark of a movie theater. Hollywood is called the "dream factory," and dreams have inspired avant-garde filmmakers, too. The great Surrealist Luis

Buñuel, for example, made his first film, *Un Chien andalou* (1929), from a screenplay that he and another young Spaniard in Paris, Salvador Dalí, derived from their dreams. No one who has seen this startling dream-film can forget its opening. A man sharpens a razor, goes out onto a balcony and looks up at the full moon as a thin cloud slices across it, at which point the eye of a woman who has appeared out of nowhere is sliced with the razor. Even if this is occurring in the man's imagination, it is

there on the screen with so vivid a quality of physical reality that we recoil in shock, as if our own eyes were under attack. To this combination of the associatively mental (the slit moon leading to the slit eye) and the arrestingly physical (the slit eye with the jelly bleeding out), *Un Chien andalou* owes its singular ability to evoke the experience of a dream.

Colin McGinn's new book on the movies doesn't just say that they draw inspiration from dreams, or that they have a dreamlike effect on the audience, or even that, as Buñuel thought, they are the medium best suited to imitate the workings of the dreaming mind. McGinn, who dealt

Gilberto Perez, who teaches at Sarah Lawrence College, is the author of The Material Ghost: Films and Their Medium (Johns Hopkins).

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with dreams and other mental images in his recent *Mindsight*, asserts in *The Power of Movies* that necessarily, not through the talent or inclination of their makers but by the intrinsic character of their medium, films are like dreams. A philosopher of the analytic school, which aspires to the scientific, he puts forward the analogy between watching a film and having a dream as a sweeping proposition, tantamount to a law of nature, and he aims to render "the points of analogy...precise and illuminating, not mere vague metaphors." He pushes the analogy to the limit, where the images on the screen lose all bodily mooring and become sheer figments of our imagination, indistinguishable from the images we dream. No one else has held so single-mindedly to the notion that film is a medium of mind.

Some may argue that, unlike dreams, films seem real, to which McGinn has a clever reply: Dreams seem real too, while we are dreaming them, even if not when we recollect them afterward. But surely neither dreams nor films affect us in exactly the same way as reality. Saying that they both seem "real" to us just means that in both cases we're caught up in illusion, and there are different degrees and different kinds of illusion, which must be sorted out in order to understand more accurately the points of similarity between films and dreams—and also the points of divergence. McGinn dismisses Surrealism as too unreal in its representation of dreams, but the phony dream scenes designed by Dalí for Hitchcock's *Spellbound* (1945) are the sole example he gives. He doesn't mention, perhaps hasn't seen—mass-audience movies define the medium for him—*Un Chien andalou*, whose blend of striking reality and disconcerting unreality rings true to what having a dream feels like.

Throughout his book McGinn stays at the level of speculation and seldom gets down to concrete examples. He admits he has a poor memory for movies, but he doesn't consider this a deficiency on his part. Rather, he takes his own forgetfulness to be a general condition and offers it as evidence that films are like dreams, which we also tend to forget. But is our memory for films actually worse than our memory for novels, plays or paintings? In my own case it is not, and in my acquaintance some people have (if you'll pardon the expression) a photographic memory for movies. The not uncommon belief that we forget films arose in the days before videotapes and DVDs, when we could pull any book down from the shelf but had to rely on the memory of the last time we saw a movie.

In *Feeling and Form* (1953) the aesthetician Susanne Langer sketched a theory of film in analogy to dreams. According to Langer, literature recounts the past, in the mode of memory; drama is oriented toward the future, what happens next, what is to come, in the mode of destiny; and film inhabits an everlasting now, "a virtual present, an order of direct apparition," in the dream mode:

The most noteworthy formal characteristic of dream is that the dreamer is always at the center of it. Places shift, persons act and speak, or change or fade.... But the dreamer is always "there".... This aesthetic peculiarity, this relation to things perceived, characterizes the dream mode: it is this that the moving picture takes over, and whereby it creates a virtual present. In its relation to the images, actions, events, that constitute the story, the camera is in the place of the dreamer.

But the camera is not a dreamer. We are usually agents in a dream. The camera...is not itself in the picture. It is the mind's eye and nothing more. Neither is the picture...likely to be dreamlike in its structure.

For Langer the film-dream analogy holds only with respect to the camera, which takes the place of the mind's eye, and not when it comes to the actors in the picture or the story they enact. McGinn, on the other hand, wants the analogy to hold both for the camera and for everything in the picture, the actors in particular.

He maintains that the film image, being made of light, is disburdened of matter and invested with mind. He quotes the psychologist, philosopher and pioneering film theorist Hugo Munsterberg, who saw film as expressing "the action of the mind as against the mere action of the body" and the camera as an agency "by which space and time are overcome and attention, memory, imagination, and emotion are impressed on the bodily world." But if for Munsterberg film is a medium of mind, it is nevertheless mind engaged with matter, with a bodily world represented on the screen; like Langer, he understands the camera as the mind's eye encountering that world. For McGinn, though, the human body that appears on the screen is "the dematerialized body...the kind of body we associate with the idea of ghosts and angels, phantoms of one kind or another, spectral presences in human form. This is the idea of the human body with the material stuffing taken out of it, transformed into something impalpable."

Of Fred Astaire, McGinn observes:

Only a dematerialized body could treat space and gravity as he so effortlessly does. In a certain sense, then, dance is the essence of cinema—the most visible assertion of its ability to transform the human body. When Astaire starts to move, he releases the potential of the medium—he becomes what the image suggests that he might be, a shimmering incorporeality.

McGinn is right to note the affinity between film and dance. But dance is not about incorporeality. It is very much an art of the body, even, or especially, as airy and nimble a body as Astaire's. Our response to dance depends on our sense of the body performing it, no less subject to gravity than our own bodies and yet capable of moving with transcendent grace. Astaire's dance numbers eschew the kind of fanciful editing or camera work that would have interfered with our appreciation of the dancer's body and its movement in actual space.

McGinn isn't wrong about the ghostliness of the film image. His error is to disregard its materiality. (He would have been wise to consider the mixture of the mental and the bodily in *Un Chien andalou*.) Screen presence, that quality all movie stars possess, each in his or her distinctive way—Astaire as well as John Wayne, Isabelle Huppert or Naomi Watts in the latter-day surreal *Mulholland Drive*, as well as Greta Garbo—clearly has to do with the camera's rendering of their bodies. The film image is made of light, true, but light directly received by the camera from the body of things, which confers on the impalpable image a material palpability, a documentary stamp. The French film critic and theorist André Bazin described the photographic image as a "tracing...[an] impression in light...a mold. As such it carries with it more than mere resemblance, namely a kind of identity." McGinn treats Bazin as a naïve realist who thought that the photographic image was identical to the object depicted. But Bazin didn't mean that the camera exactly reproduces the object ("mere resemblance"). What he meant was that, by virtue of its direct connection with the object, the photographic image captures something of the object itself ("a kind of identity"). It is McGinn who is being naïve, who misses the way film images peculiarly combine the ghostly and the material, and how a movie star is somehow both a shimmering incorporeality and a bodily presence.

The dualism posited by Descartes, the split between mind and body, with the mind as "what the *person* essentially is," is in McGinn's view not "just the fantasy

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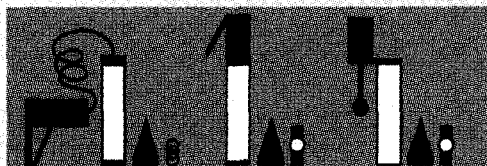
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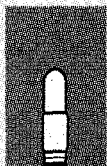
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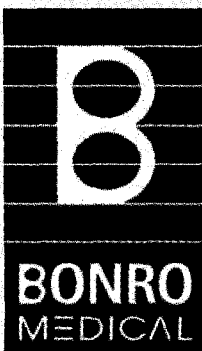
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of an eccentric philosopher" but "the way people naturally think...we are instinctive dualists." It is in any case the way McGinn thinks, and he imputes it to the movies: "When we watch a movie, seeing those immaterial images dance before us, we are tacitly subscribing to the Cartesian conception of the person...as an immaterial entity." Bazin and others have argued that, unlike theater, which sets up the stage as a realm apart from nature, cinema puts human beings on the same plane as the rest of nature. But McGinn insists that movies remove us from the physical world, and he's glad of it:

The sheer inertness of matter—its essential mindlessness—can seem repulsive in itself. We want to overcome the alienation we naturally feel from our own bodies.... We don't want to feel that we are made of the same stuff as the objects around us.... Movies offer us a transformed reality in which the body is stripped of its material bonds and becomes united with our essential nature as centers of consciousness.

McGinn's dualism is apparent in his notion that an actor "pretends that someone else's mind is in her body. She doesn't pretend that her body is someone else's...since it so obviously is her body." But it is through the body—including of course the face and the voice—that we gain access to the mind. The actor acts with her body, and to pretend that her mind is someone else's she must pretend that her body is someone else's, too. The character an actor plays is a fiction, someone who has neither a real mind nor a real body, and the actor's job is to lend that fiction both a body and a mind.

There is another form of dualism McGinn espouses. Besides dividing the mind from the body, he divides reason from emotion, the "higher" mental faculties from what he calls the "base self." "Think Jekyll and Hyde," he explains, forgetting that the moral of the story of Jekyll and Hyde is that the split is fatal. In movies as in dreams, he believes, "the higher mental faculties are not in play or are in abeyance," and the base self takes over, "childlike, instinct-driven, and sensation-fixated." Wittgenstein liked to go to the movies, McGinn tells us, and assumes that the lowly movies could only have served Wittgenstein as a relief from the rigors of the higher mind: "I experience movies in just this way myself. There is nothing better after a hard day of philosophical thinking and writing than a 'mindless' movie." We don't know what Wittgenstein got from the movies, but other philosophers—Stanley Cavell, Gilles Deleuze, George Wilson—have found them to be a vehicle for thought,

an incitement to it, rather than an escape. And as for the supposed dormancy of reason in dreams, it's worth recalling that a dream about a ring of serpents revealed to the chemist Kekule the structure of the benzene molecule.

Comedy poses a problem for McGinn's dream theory of film. Dreams are not funny. Even when they are happy, they have no sense of humor. Perhaps this is because we are always at their center, and comedy requires a certain distance. We may awaken from a dream and find it funny, as McGinn points out; but by then we have gained distance from the dream. And distance, whether comic or aesthetic, is not something his theory allows us when watching a film. His whole emphasis is on the affective power of movies, their capacity for manipulating our feelings, for emotion writ large on the screen: "Both film and dream serve, not just to represent and express emotion, but to open the emotional valves—to let emotion flow freely." His theory fails with comedy and applies better to melodrama, which theater critic Eric Bentley has characterized as "the naturalism of the dream life."

Even with melodrama, though, McGinn runs into trouble. What a film makes us feel, he says, is what the characters are feeling: "It is as if we are seeing the emotions of the characters, so entwined are the images and the feelings." But drama enacts conflict, and to be effective it must be able to imagine the different sides of a conflict. Imbued with feeling though the images may be, a film portrays a number of characters who are not all feeling the same thing—unlike in a dream, which represents the emotions, the imagination, of just one person. That's what Langer meant when she said that "the camera is not a dreamer": It is not a character in the picture, nor is it usually identified with the feelings and perceptions of just one character in the picture. The self-centeredness of dreams, for Langer their most distinctive property, is puzzling to McGinn. He comes up with the interesting idea that it "helps in generating a certain attitude that defines our relationship to the screen...the attitude of *identification*." Our identification with the camera as the mind's eye is the basis of Langer's dream mode, but for McGinn it is our identification with a character on the screen

that really bears the imprint of the dream: you may not be literally up on the screen yourself, but you identify with the people who are. This identification may be monogamous or promiscuous: you may pick a single character and stick with him throughout the film...or you

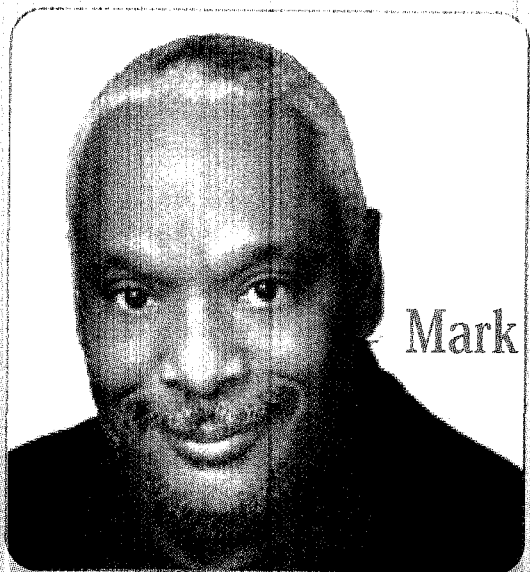
may shift your allegiance back and forth, now choosing this person, now that. Whatever you do, there is always someone on the screen whose place you are imaginatively occupying.

McGinn seems to think that it's entirely up to you which character in a film you identify with, that you stay with one character or switch from one to another according to your own monogamous or promiscuous disposition, that it's not anything the film does but your own affinity with a character you happen to like that brings on your identification. "When I watch *Brief Encounter* (probably my favorite film)," he writes, "I feel a strong sense of identification with the female lead, Laura, played by Celia Johnson, and less with the male lead, Alec, played by Trevor Howard—probably because I feel a stronger resemblance of personality between Laura and myself." But *Brief Encounter* (a 1945 melodrama of unconsummated adultery directed by David Lean and based on a play by Noël Coward) is told from Laura's point of view with first-person voiceover narration by her, and even the Rachmaninoff piano concerto on the soundtrack is something she's hearing on the radio as she recounts the story in her mind, which the viewer is taken into from start to finish. Regardless of your personality, you have no choice but to identify with this character. That's where the movie puts you, and if you don't want to be there you can only be turned off or walk out. No doubt McGinn likes this movie so much because he personally likes Laura, but the calculated, insistent way the movie sets up the viewer's identification with her can't be overlooked.

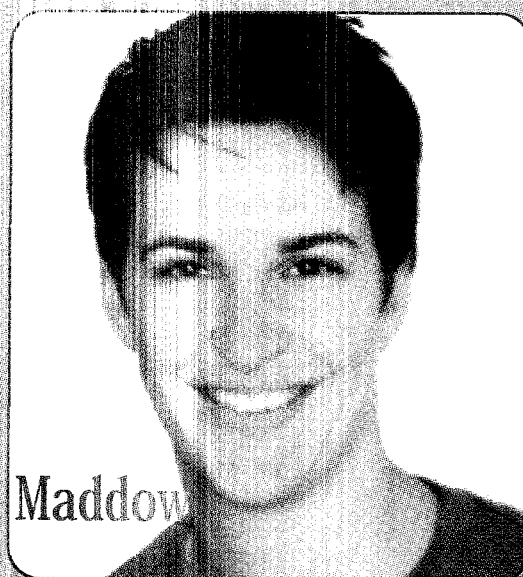
To me the most mysterious property of dreams is that we are their authors but feel that we are merely their audience. We experience our dreams as if they were not of our making, not products of our own imagination but something given to us, something we seem to be receiving from elsewhere. This property is above all what leads us to the interpretation of dreams: They don't seem to be coming from us but to be telling us something we need to decipher. And it is key to the film-dream analogy: Watching a film, we are caught up in a succession of images not of our making, which is like what we feel during a dream (and unlike, it may be noted, a daydream).

McGinn construes the analogy in another way, however. He puts the emphasis on "the active role of the imagination in creating the movie we 'watch'; for in a real sense the movie takes place inside our own head—the screen is merely the trigger for

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this inner activity." Some have supposed that the viewer of a movie has the illusion of being its author, but McGinn goes further and alleges that, as with our dreams, we actually are the authors of the movies we view: "The images we literally see are splashes of light that act as stimuli to our constructive mental processes: we don't see the characters and scenes at all—we imagine them." It's good to emphasize how our imagination comes into play when we watch

a film. One often hears it said that movies, unlike novels, leave nothing to the imagination—though any shot on the screen shows us only a detail and leaves the rest of the world implied. But McGinn appears to believe that a film shows us nothing at all and leaves everything to the imagination. His fantasy of the future of movies—their "manifest destiny"—is that they will be

downloaded directly into the brain. You rent a cassette, plug it into your cor-

tex, and enjoy the experience. There is no screen, no light projection—just mental images floating through your consciousness.

Although, he concedes, "no one yet has any idea how to stimulate brain cells so as to produce specific images," he looks forward to the day when movies will take place wholly inside our heads. That might be a lot of fun, but it wouldn't be the movies. ■

IN OUR ORBIT

Unborn in the USA

MARK SORKIN

ABSOLUTE CONVICTIONS: My Father, a City, and the Conflict That Divided America.

By Eyal Press. Henry Holt. 292 pp. \$25.

What's the matter with Buffalo? The city was once the manufacturing capital of upstate New York, an industrial hub whose factories assured prosperity and a stable workforce. But its midcentury boom came to an end in the aftermath of Vietnam, and as plants shut down, unemployment rates shot up to twice the national average. Democrats in office, blamed for the economic slide, were soon replaced by Republicans, thanks in part to the support of blue-collar "Reagan Democrats." Rather than tackling Rust Belt doldrums, though, the new conservative leadership launched an attack on cultural elites. A moral campaign against women's reproductive rights received official sanction when the city's mayor welcomed Operation Rescue's high-profile Spring of Life protest in 1992, and it reached its terrifying peak in 1998 when James Kopp, a pro-life fanatic, murdered a local abortion provider, Barnett Slepian.

In his captivating new book *Absolute Convictions*, *Nation* contributing writer Eyal Press explores the links between his hometown's post-Vietnam decline and its emergence as a battlefield in the national crusade against choice. Unlike the social critic Thomas Frank, Press does not dismiss this culture war as a faux-populist platform designed to turn working-class voters against their economic interests. Instead, he accepts the seriousness of antiabortion zeal and engages those whose values he rejects, struggling to understand why so many Americans are

so fiercely opposed to reproductive freedom. Tracing the ascendancy of the Christian right and the radicalization of the pro-life movement, he makes a critical—and easily blurred—distinction between ardent opponents of abortion rights who pursue their aims through civil disobedience and demonstrations (however menacing) and the zealots in their midst who take up arms in a holy war to "save" the unborn. As Buffalo languished, Press reveals, the city became a breeding ground for both factions.

Abortion politics are, of course, intensely personal. Frankly acknowledging that he is by no means a neutral guide, Press shares source material culled from his family archives and offers firsthand testimony on a murder that continues to haunt him. Folded into the narrative is an admiring portrait of his father, Shalom, an obstetrician in Buffalo who has endured harassment at his clinic—and, not infrequently, on his front lawn—for the abortion services he offers, and who was put under federal marshal protection after the killing of his colleague Slepian.

In a particularly tense exchange, Karen Prior, an Operation Rescue activist, bursts into tears as she admits that, since the murder, she has come to regret her earlier support for intimidating OB-GYNs. "I told Prior that seeing her reaction moved me. But I did not reach across to comfort her," Press writes. "The reason, I realized afterward, is that a part of me didn't want her to feel comforted at that moment: the same part of me that

thought about how I would have received her words had the victim of the shooting been my father."

Reflecting on his personal history, Press draws some suggestive connections between his family's Israeli roots and their involvement in the American struggle over abortion. Shalom came to Buffalo from Israel in 1973, the year of the Yom Kippur War and the Supreme Court decision in *Roe v. Wade*. Ironically, one of the reasons he immigrated to the United States was to escape the messianism gaining ground in the Middle East. For Eyal, Slepian's murder brings into sharp relief not only Yitzhak Rabin's assassination by a right-wing Jewish extremist but also conflicting tendencies within his bloodline. His father's hard-nosed Zionism strengthened his resolve after Slepian was killed, making him more determined to continue his work in the face of violent threats. But his mother, a Holocaust survivor, found her husband's stoic defiance troubling, and urged him to reconsider his decision. "Wasn't my father right that giving in would send whoever had shot Dr. Slepian the message that violence worked?" Press asks. "But wasn't my mother also right to demand that, for her sake as well as for his own...he consider his safety for once?"

By honoring the courageous work his father has done, Press makes a strong case for defending abortion rights against perennial assault. And by seeking to understand, rather than simply condemn, his father's intransigent adversaries, he presents a refreshingly complex portrayal of the antiabortion movement, one that must be reckoned with if prochoice advocates hope to stand their ground. Navigating such slippery terrain is a tough challenge, but Press meets it with uncommon sensitivity and skill. Deeply researched, deftly told, *Absolute Convictions* plunges into, and transcends, a polarized debate that makes partisans of us all. ■

FILMS

Consuming Desires

STUART KLAWANS

THANK YOU FOR SMOKING • DUCK SEASON

see Barbara Stanwyck in the lion's cage, arms flung wide in her evangelist's robes, gleaming, defiant, a miracle woman sold on her own con. At her back stand the tenements of her youth and the realization that anyone living in them must be a sucker. Immediately before her looms God's judgment, and a radio audience in the millions. She's betting on salvation now, with nothing left to wager but her own flesh: the most conspicuously experienced chorus-girl body in all of movie history. There's a huckster for you; there's a risk-taking American entrepreneur.

Long ago, when full-time show people cranked out the movies and Frank Capra hadn't gone all preachy himself, we got Stanwyck as our sexy bamboozler, out to gull the world lest she be gulled. Now we get Katie Holmes. A nice enough girl; she makes you want to ruffle her hair and give her a scratch behind the ears. How could she have been made the femme fatale in *Thank You for Smoking*, a film that otherwise casts its roles with the thoroughgoing precision, the literal-mindedness, of a rich kid filling gaps in his baseball card collection? See the low estate to which dishonest women have fallen! So sad is their decline in today's amateurish, anarcho-capitalist Hollywood that Holmes doesn't even get to play the liar-in-chief. She must yield in *Thank You for Smoking* to a slab of Mormon-bred masculinity: the precisely, predictably cast Aaron Eckhart.

His eyes like spacious skies, his hair an amber wave of grain, Eckhart first made himself known (and hated) as an incarnation of bullying, cocky Corporate America in Neil LaBute's *In the Company of Men*. Though Eckhart has demonstrated a creditable range since then (being macho and suicidally stupid in *Nurse Betty*), his bland perfection in filling a suit has now made him the no-brain choice to play Nick Naylor, the cheerfully dishonest tobacco-industry spokesman who is the narrator, satirical butt and ultimate hero of *Thank You for Smoking*.

"You know the guy who can date any woman? I'm him on crack," says Naylor in voiceover at the beginning, introducing himself with a characteristic sexual boast.

Or is it a sexual metaphor? The occasion for this opening comment, far from being intimate, is a booking on a television talk show, where Naylor performs his favorite gyration—the truth-twist—in full view of an audience. So it goes throughout the film, as he directs his energy almost exclusively into the professional exertion of his jaw muscles. Even when Holmes gets him to stray, Naylor can't shut up about work.

If *Thank You for Smoking* were the sort of film in which you can learn things about the characters, including truths they don't know themselves, these details might have added up to something—a revelation, say, about the sexual economy of Mr. Corporate America. But as it's been written and directed by Jason Reitman, based on Christopher Buckley's comic novel, with the supervision of sixteen (count 'em) producers, co-producers, executive producers and associate producers, *Thank You for Smoking* scarcely seems able to recognize a character trait, let alone develop it. Witness the thin stuff turned out by our anarcho-capitalists, whose scenes (some of them captioned) serve mostly as illustrations for the voiceover, leaving you nothing to learn about the characters beyond what they say of themselves.

Or almost nothing. I count perhaps two scenes in *Thank You for Smoking* that have a function beyond exposition, the first of which brings Naylor together with a former Marlboro Man who is dying, bitterly and publicly, of lung cancer. (With the precision and predictability of a slide clicking into place at a lecture, Marlboro Man is played by Sam Elliott. In the same way, the tobacco cartel's courtly leader must be Robert Duvall; the slickest talent agent in Hollywood is Rob Lowe; Vermont's ill-dressed and self-righteous senator is William H. Macy; and Naylor's blustery boss is J.K. Simmons. At shortstop for the New York Yankees: Derek Jeter.) But now back to Naylor, who must get Marlboro Man

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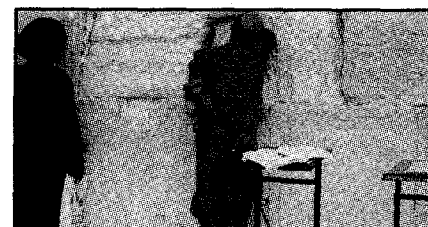
to accept a pile of hush money, stacked in the traditional metal suitcase. In the film's best scene by far, Naylor accomplishes this daunting assignment by means of a classic con: He shows Marlboro Man how to use the suitcase in a public-relations stunt, getting him so caught up in this step-by-step demonstration that the mark is at last persuaded.

The tougher the challenge, the bigger the thrill. As Naylor says over and over, sparing our ears neither in voiceover nor on camera, he plays this game because he's good at it, and plays it for Big Tobacco because they test his skill. Since no tenements loom in his background (their very existence seems unimaginable in the Buckley-Naylor world), you might be tempted to take the liar at his word and think he's loyal only to his talent. But then, at around the eighty-five-minute mark, the film manages to put together its second dramatic scene, and Naylor shows that he does believe in a principle.

Risking his career (though not his flesh) by testifying before Senator William H. Macy, Naylor triumphantly asserts the right of every American to choose freely in the market, without the interference of a nanny state. I translate freely. What he actually says, with angry conviction, has more to do with his young son's chances of smoking someday and other questions of a "what of the children?" nature. What Naylor means, though—this time, you don't need captions to follow him—is that children grow up, and a grown-up society lets people buy what they please.

I will not argue with this defense of liberty, understood strictly as a consumer option, except to complain that it's not cynical. As *Thank You for Smoking* reaches its Frank Capra climax—I mean Capra in his preachy years—the mild diversion of its lies and scams drops away, and with it all pretense of dirty fun. Smoking? It's not a cool, dangerous drug kick but a policy statement. Corporate flackery? Not an exhilarating, amoral game but a necessary social lubricant. And speaking of lubricants: The only vice that remains unvirtuous, in the film's scheme, is sex with Katie Holmes, who alone is punished for this sin.

In the name of Barbara Stanwyck, I say that women in the movies deserve better and ought to be able to do worse. Christopher Buckley himself recalls, in the press kit for *Thank You for Smoking*, that his original inspiration came from watching a Tobacco Institute spokeswoman at work. Couldn't she have become Nicole Naylor? Or would postcoital smoke in a woman's mouth have soured that fine word, "choice"?



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As for Buckley's adapters: I note that the lead producer of *Thank You for Smoking*, David Sacks, went into show business only in 2003, using the profit he'd made from an online financial-service business. That's as much experience as is required in anarcho-capitalist Hollywood, where a film's dialogue can now insistently laud Katie Holmes's breasts without anyone on the set—the director, the costumer, the bleeding best boy, for Pete's sake—remembering to show them off. A movie that praises professional hucksters, made by rank amateurs! But Sacks is spending his own money (as his first production preaches) and is free to enjoy it however he likes.

Your enjoyment, and mine, are our own lookout.

Flashing onto the screen and then fading away in languid rhythm, silently, views of a Mexico City residential quarter set the mood for Fernando Eimbcke's *Duck Season* (*Temporada de Patos*). The roof line of a housing project, tilting against the sky at a Dziga Vertov angle. A close-up of someone's bicycle chained to a lamp-post, the rear wheel missing. Kids playing on a swing set in a lot beside a highway. A Volkswagen Beetle nosing slowly down a quiet street. A title tells you it's Sunday, 11 AM, when nothing much happens. The images are black-and-white, as if waiting to be completed by someone's act of imagination.

On the eighth floor of one of the project buildings, a woman nervously hurries off for the day. Did she remember to turn off the stove? Yes. Did she remember to turn off the coffee maker? Yes. Everything is secure for her 14-year-old son, Flama (Daniel Miranda), and his curly-headed buddy Moko (Diego Cataño), who can be expected to keep the apartment neat. Their only plan for the day: to play video games, drink Coke and munch on chips, without getting up from the sofa.

With one brief exception, everything from this point on will take place inside the little apartment, which despite the mother's hopes slowly fills with physical disorder and emotional unruliness. First the power goes out. Then an unknown neighbor comes knocking—16-year-old Rita (Danny Perea)—to ask if she can use the oven. Then the boys order pizza but won't pay the deliveryman, after he's run up eight flights of stairs, because he's eleven seconds late on the thirty-minute guarantee. Bespectacled and 30-ish, Ulises (Enrique Arreola) responds to this affront with more patience than exasperation, but he

still refuses to be stifled. Now that he's staying, too, four people are knocking about the apartment, feeling bored, edgy, anxious, angry, sad and horny. They have several more emotions, too—but those take a while to show themselves.

Think of *Duck Season* as being, in its sly way, a road movie. Although the characters don't go anywhere and the scenery doesn't change, a handful of people are nevertheless shut up together as if in a car, to experience the mundane passage of time and explore one another's natures. Even the title hints at road movies. The ducks figure in a painting of garage-sale provenance that hangs on the apartment wall: a picture of birds taking off for migration. A poignant image, especially for young people (and for an outsider from San Juan

named Ulises). By the end of *Duck Season*, you understand that all these characters are taking off, too, no matter how stuck they seem.

Maybe, in fact, you understand too much. After the halfway point, Eimbcke's script ticks off its revelations with almost metronomic regularity, at a pace that lets in one or two more than you might want. But this is the only forced aspect of a film in which the actors seem to breathe their roles rather than perform them. Lovingly cast, suavely directed and always pitched perfectly, whatever its tone, *Duck Season* is the kind of small, quiet, thoughtful movie that ought to be as abundant as Sunday afternoons. Better hurry to see it, because another won't come around for months. ■

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■ New York-Tipitapa Sister City Project. Join Pete Seeger and Tao Rodriguez-Seeger for an intimate evening of stories, conversation, songs, hope and inspiration. For Us. For Nicaragua. April 16, 5 PM. At the home of Dr. Arthur Levine, president of Teachers College, Columbia University, and Linda Fentiman. Hosted by Dr. Darlyne Bailey, vice president of academic affairs and dean of the college. Limited seating. Donation: \$250 per person. Easy payment: www.tipitapa.org. (646) 610-2215 or PeteSeegerEvent@tipitapa.org. Make check payable to: Dos Pueblos, 2565 Broadway #173, New York, NY 10025.

The Politics of Resistance

■ Four books, four authors, for freedom. Stephen Bronner (*Blood in the Sand*), Stanley Aronowitz (*How Class Works*), Frances Fox Piven (*The War at Home*) and Cornel West (*Democracy Matters*) come together to discuss freedom and political resistance at 6 PM on Thursday, March 16, at the New School (66 West 12th Street). Sponsored by the Wolfson Center for National Affairs. Information at boxoffice@newschooledu or (212) 229-5488. Tickets: \$10. Students free with ID.

Iraq: The Logic of Withdrawal

■ Join Howard Zinn and Anthony Arnove for the launch of Arnove's new book, *Iraq: The Logic of Withdrawal*, with foreword and afterword by Zinn. Introduction by Amy Goodman of *Democracy Now!* Saturday, March 25, 1 PM. Quaker Friends Meeting House, 15 Rutherford Place (at 15th Street), NYC. Suggested donation: \$5-\$10.

Can't Stop Won't Stop

■ Join the Haymarket Forum Saturday, March 25, 7 PM, for a discussion with writer Jeff Chang about his groundbreaking book *Can't Stop Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation*, at Galapagos Art Space in Brooklyn. With Deepa Fernandes and Andy Hsiao, and a performance by DJ Rekha. 70 North Sixth, Williamsburg. NYC.haymarketforum.org. Free.

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ORGANIZATIONS

HARTFORD, CT, NATION DISCUSSION GROUP meets monthly on the first Sunday at 2 PM. The Smith House, Trinity College, Hartford, CT 06106. Next two meetings are February 5 and March 5. For more info contact Suzi Smith, (860) 693-8549, suzsmith@comcast.net.

LOS ANGELES, BRENTWOOD AREA. *Nation* discussion group forming. E-mail berlandis@verizon.net.

MEMPHIS, TN, *Nation* discussion group forming. E-mail heidikenaga@yahoo.com if you're interested in joining.

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WOODLAND HILLS, CA, NATION DISCUSSION GROUP FORMING. Contact Bailey (818) 227-0076.

VALDOSTA, GEORGIA, NATION DISCUSSION GROUP FORMING. E-mail Matthew: matedodega@hotmail.com.

RICHMOND, VA, NATION DISCUSSION GROUP is forming. Please contact Jerry Gorman if you're interested in joining. (804) 266-7400; e-mail: gorfam@comcast.net.

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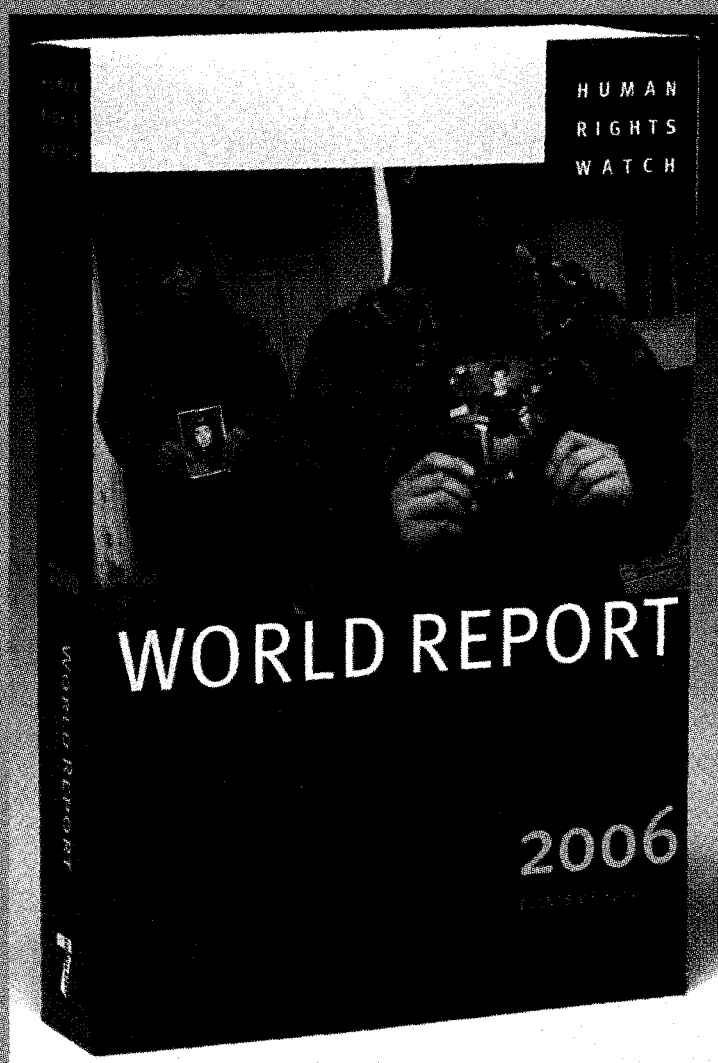
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